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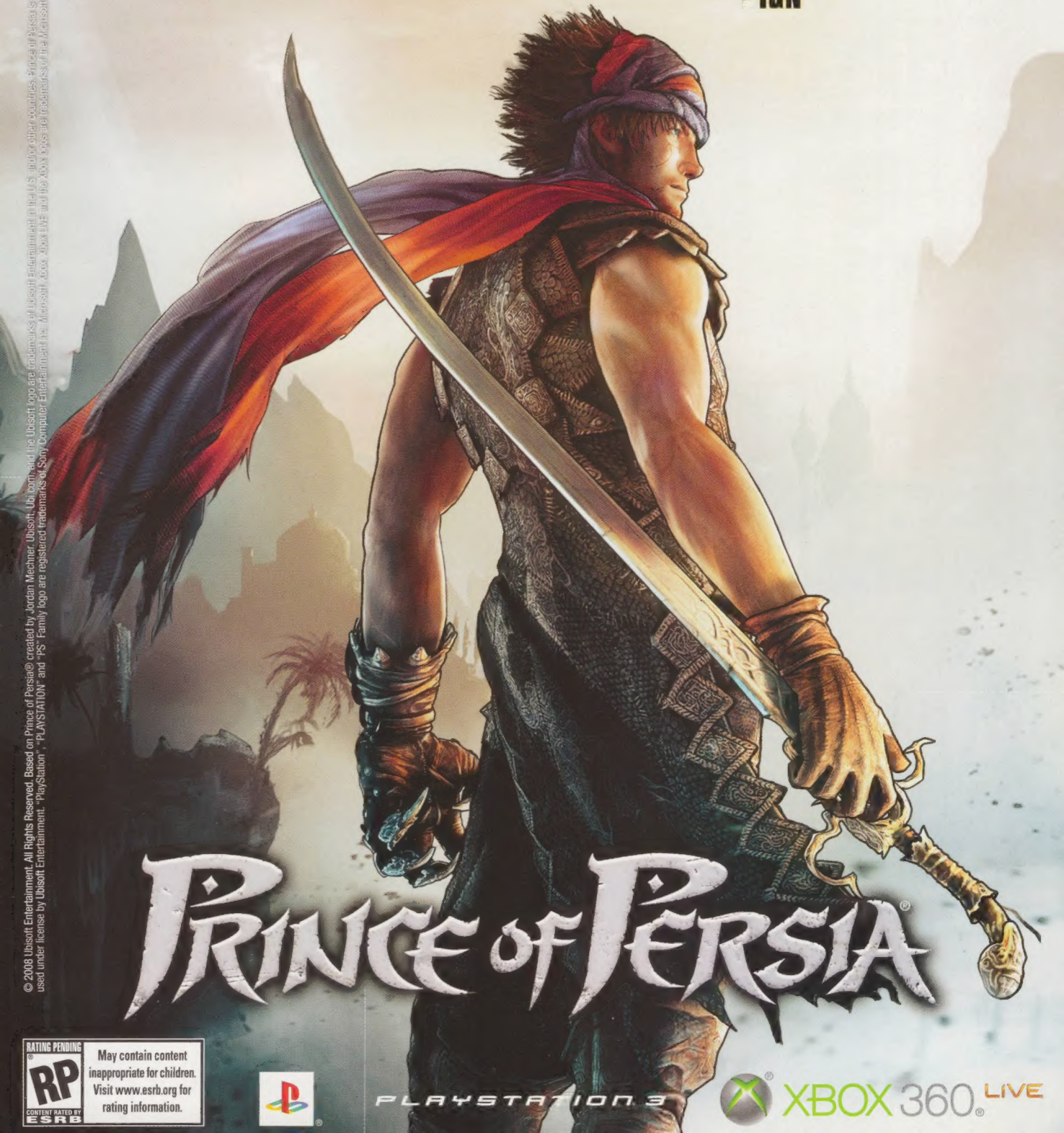

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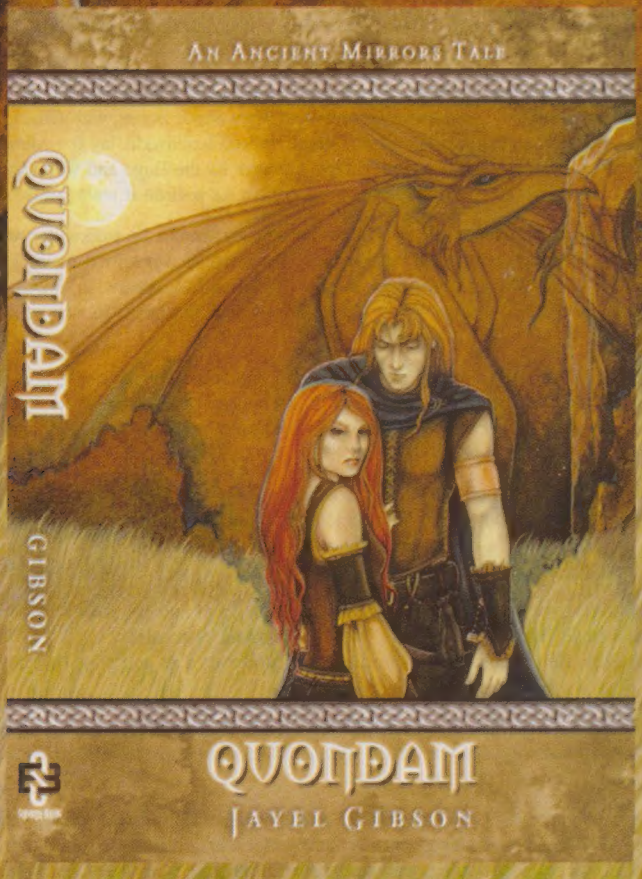

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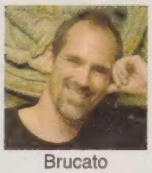
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"We are **KURT HUGGINS** and **ZELDA DEVON**. We live in a pocket-sized apartment in Brooklyn where we collect neat, weird things. Our home is abundant with books, old furniture, mismatching tea cups, and a cat named Cipher. We both illustrate stuff for money so we can continue to invent stories, buy shoelaces, watch puppet shows, and eat sandwiches."

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DEALER INQUIRES ARE WELCOME!

By Phil Satyr Brucato

Foot-Notes: A whirlwind tour of feet in myths, fairy tales, and pop culture.

O! the music of their feet—of their dancing goblin feet!
O! the magic! O! the sorrow when it dies.

—J.R.R. Tolkein, *Goblin Feet*

Beneath my soles sang the pulse of the world. It was spring 2006, and I'd been hiking the Appalachian Trail with my friend Pooka, barefoot as a hobbit on a dream-date with Mordor.

That morning, I awakened to a misty haze. A storm the night before had cloaked our campsite with otherworldly fog. Entranced, I'd stirred Pooka from her sleep and opened the door-flap to reveal a lush green faerie grove. "Wow," she breathed, "there are no words for this." Thunderstruck, we stepped out to savor the splendor of it all. After my drowsy hikemate returned to sleep, I wandered off like some enchanted princeling, as close to that living land as I dared. Although I met no faerie maidens in that mist, it would have been perfectly appropriate if I had.

The almost luminous bare feet in John William Waterhouse's* Pandora *gave viewers a shocking familiarity with the subject.

There's a reason folks call faeries "elementals." Such entities are forces of Nature incarnate. What, then, could be more natural than the point where a living being joins the living earth? For most creatures—certainly for those who walk as we do—that point of contact is the foot. Humble, abused, often hidden from view, our feet connect us to Nature, taking us on journeys and bearing our weight when we go. For better and worse, feet anchor us to earth. And in that point of contact, there's magic to be found.

Magic, as we know, is the realm of Faerie. And although many legendary fae slide, slither, or fly, most faerie beings in art and literature walk like mortals do. Even when they appear in familiar guise, however, such entities remain somewhat otherworldly. And so, for generations, artists and poets have portrayed our strange cousins with bared or monstrous feet: goat's cloves, raven's claws, duck's webbing and horse's hooves. Quite often, though, they have feet much like our own. These feet might be tender, like those of Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid, or tough as oak, like the uncanny Hornfoots of George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire*. Although Black Sabbath might claim that "faeries wear boots," authors like J.R.R. Tolkien, illustrators like Arthur Rackham, and gallery painters like John Waterhouse often portray them with no shoes at all. Barefoot, as was I, on the elemental earth, these fey figures remain "close to the land" from which they came.

Traditionally, mortals who live close to Nature or the Otherworld go barefoot, too. The peasants, Bohemians, and lovers who grace the paintings of William-Adolphe Bouguereau are clearly human, yet retain a fey luminescence. Unshod adventurers like Dennis Cramer's Mara of the Celts or Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan of the Apes abhor the corruption of mainstream civilization. Johnny Appleseed strode barefoot across the American wilderness, while a free-soled beggar maid seduced King Copphetua just by being herself. To dare rough terrain and social disdain, such characters dance across a wild edge. The curious maiden in Edward Robert Hughes's painting *Midsummer Eve* (1908) steps unshod into an enchanting faerie ring; it all seems innocuous, but ... well, faeries are faeries, and nothing about them is predictable.

To many modern folks, going barefoot mingles child-like daring with subversive hedonism. It's not surprising that the same supermarkets that ban bare feet among customers carry magazines filled with unshod

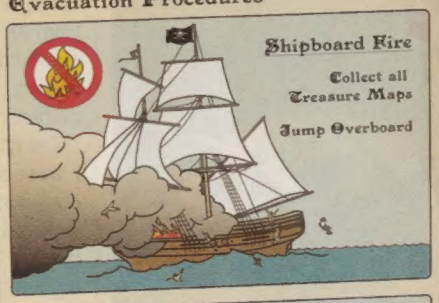
Pirate Safety & Emergency Procedures

For your safety, do not remove this card from pirate ship.

Safety On Board

Spotting Drizzt Do'Urden

Evacuation Procedures



Do Not Engage

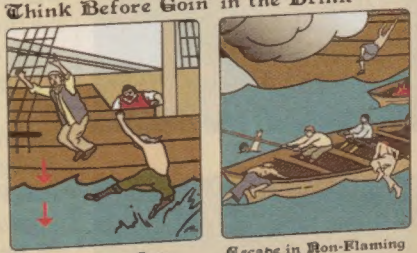
Ebony skin
White hair

Green cloak
Twin scimitars

Huge, black panther

Purple eyes, Levitation

Think Before Goin' in the Drink



Do Not Leap Onto Sharp Rocks

Escape in Non-Flaming Longboats

Securing Captured Vessels

Replace Flag with Yer Colors

Lash Former Captain to Mast

Secure all Booty and Swag

Tighten peg legs (may have loosened in boarding)

Scan Horizon for Pursuit

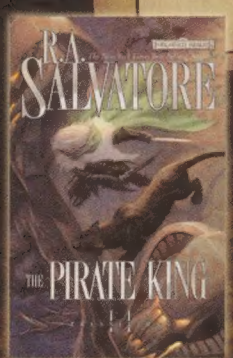
Unnatural Dangers on the Sword Coast

Lightning Bolts

Water Elementals

Fireballs

Sea Sprite



Know yer risks. Read fast.

Even the most dangerous pirates on the Sword Coast should beware when facing the likes of Drizzt Do'Urden. Following in the wake of *The New York Times* best-selling title, *The Orc King*, R.A. Salvatore plunges the dark elf and his friends into dangerous waters with *The Pirate King*.

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models and celebrities. This tension between civilized restraint and primal rebellion can become amusing, arousing, embarrassing, even violent. In his 1971 book *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, James Michener quotes a local mother who asserts: "Anyone who appears on the streets ... with long hair, dirty clothes or barefoot deserves to be shot." Faerie tales arise from such vibrant social and symbolic tensions, and so the significance of feet—bare or shod, human or otherwise—among such tales seems perfectly natural.

I'm no stranger to those tensions. As a boy, I wore shoes and socks constantly ... which, considering that I spent much of my childhood in Hawaii, made me seem a little odd. When puberty hit, however, I began sneaking out at night to run barefoot through Virginia woods. Those nights spent breathless in the dark, fearing discovery far more than injury, birthed a pagan place within my heart. I reveled in the sensations of raw earth and sharp stones, feeling more alive than I ever did in daylight.

At the time, I remained shy about my feet. It took college, yoga, dance, and a series of shoe-hating girlfriends to shake my inhibitions. That communion with the Appalachian Trail fulfilled a deep desire. There, the experience was total. For better and worse, I keenly felt the land beneath me.

On a literal level, bare feet feel. A person who goes shoeless senses each rock and puddle in his path. The texture and temperature, sharpness or smoothness of the terrain comes through without buffer or restraint. In *Deerskin*, Robin McKinley's variation on the *Donkeyskin/Catskin/Tattercoat* theme, barefoot Lissar declines a friend's request that she don shoes to visit the king, saying: "I like to know where I'm walking. In shoes, I'm always walking in shoes."

Bare feet also seem vulnerable. Fears of broken glass or sidewalk plagues inspire most folks to slip on sandals before venturing outdoors. Biblical scriptures cite sharp stones and serpents' teeth beneath an unshod heel. But beyond the practical (and exaggerated) dangers of barefoot progress lies a pervasive social disapproval. Among societies that favor footwear, bare feet are considered coarse, vulgar, and perhaps even uncanny. The wolf-girl in George MacDonald's tale "The Gray Wolf" or the swimmer in Paul Darcy Boles's story "She Sells Sea Shells" seem immediately strange because they walk barefoot comfortably across sharp stones. The unshod inhabitants of Spectre in Tim Burton's fable *Big Fish* (2003) appear to be pleasant enough, yet come across as downright ... peculiar. Outside the realms of beach or bed, naked feet often violate convention. Like Brigitte Bardot's wild Juliete in *Et Dieu ... crèa la femme* (1956) or Paulette Goddard's Gamine in *Modern Times* (1936), a barefoot rebel seems to undermine propriety.

"Don't your feet hurt?" folks asked us as we hiked. "Don't your blisters?" we replied. It's funny how many times I was called "Wild Man" by fellow travelers in that wilderness. Each night we shared with them, Pooka and I watched other hikers rub their feet, change bandages, or curse ill-fitting footwear. No blisters for us, though. We didn't make great time in comparison to our peers ... but then, our hike was a communion, not a race.

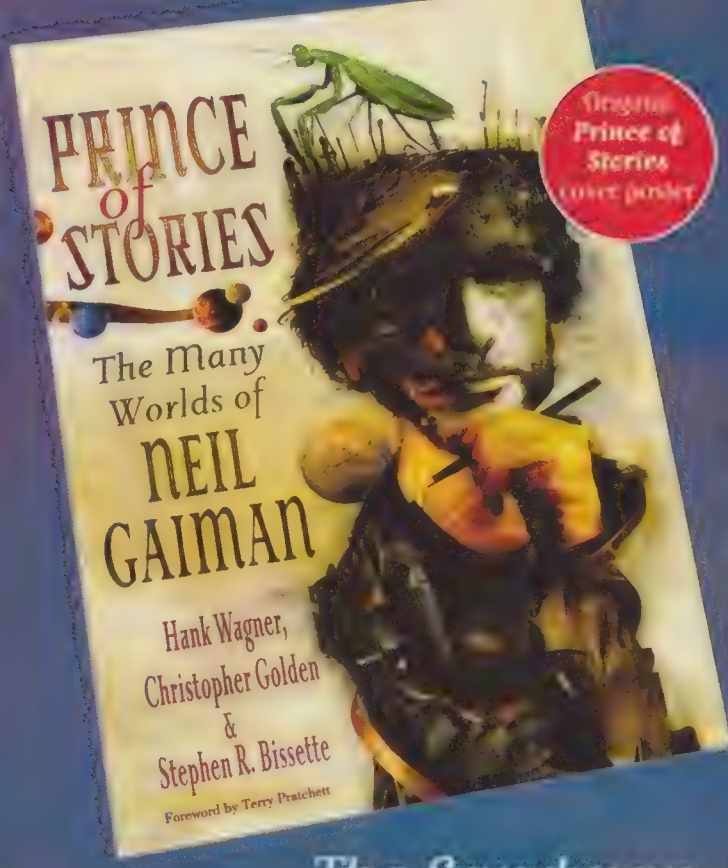
Symbolically, feet bear loads of contradictions. Depending on your culture, they can symbolize humility, carnality, or quite often both. In Buddhist iconography, footprints symbolize the presence or passage of a bodhisattva. Christ washed the feet of his disciples, and had his own washed by a "sinful" woman's tears. God forbade Moses from approaching the burning bush while wearing sandals, "for the place where you are standing is k'dusha" (endowed with ineffable holiness; see Exodus 3:5). Even today, pilgrims of many faiths travel without shoes to symbolize commitment to a cause. Worshippers often remove their shoes for prayer, especially in Muslim, Hindu, or Neopagan ceremonies. Spiritually speaking, bare feet suggest innocence, purity, sacrifice, and a humble approach to life.

Even so, a person who shuns shoes in general is considered, in many cultures, crude. Hippies and hillbillies were barred from good company, while natives of India, Africa, and the Americas often found themselves shod by order of their European conquerors. The Devil, too, goes barefoot; his feet, however, are claws or cloven hooves. English legends claim he galloped before a storm through Yorkshire in 1165, leaving hoofprints all the way to the Scarborough cliffs. Across the pond, an Appalachian folk tale called *The Barefoot Woman* portrays the Devil's wife as a fetching but troublesome barefooted stranger. Mrs. Devil stirs up trouble to trick a pair of shoes from her reluctant spouse. You just can't trust folks who won't properly "toe the line"! They seem too wild for their own good.

There's an economic flavor, too, in the symbolism of shoes. Not long ago, many people went barefoot by default. Shoemaking was a specialized trade, and badly made shoes were often worse than none at all. Aside from skin boots, wood sabots, moccasins, or sandals, fine footwear was expensive, custom-made, and often fragile. Shoes and boots inferred social status because only rich folks could afford decent ones. The leather-crafted finery of "proper dress shoes" had to wait until the European Renaissance ... and even then, they remained luxury items for upper-class feet.

As cities grew in size and filth, shoes assumed more practical concerns. The sky-high soles of Renaissance footwear protected noble feet. Pools of questionable content filled the streets of Western Europe, and the farther one stood from those, the better! Lofty pianelle and chopines literally elevated those folks who wore them. Such folks stood taller than the norm, insulated from urban gutter-taint.

Meanwhile, folks who worked the land often kept their own feet in the soil, especially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during childhood and early adolescence, when feet grow fast and expensive shoes don't. Rural folks could go their whole lives without footwear, particularly in regions like the Mediterranean, Central Africa, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and India. Even now, many people still do. Thick clodhoppers seem out of place in, say, Bali.

Inevitably, social distinctions arose around footwear and its lack. You could be "well-heeled" or "tenderfooted," "light in your loafers," or "getting the boot." Is it any wonder that Cinderella—often portrayed barefoot — gains her "toe-hold" in high society by way of a glass (or fur) slipper? Regardless of its material, an exquisite shoe bestows distinction.

(This, of course, matters less in certain cultures. The Indian take on Cinderella, as popularized by Lila Mehta, features an enchanted anklet, since many women in classical India went unshod.)

Like the metalsmith and herbalist, a good cordwainer (shoemaker) practiced an almost mystical trade. Sometimes, it must have seemed like his complex patterns of leather and lasts demanded fey assistance. One of the few truly happy tales in the Grimm Brothers' catalogue, *The Elves and the Shoemaker,* describes a pair of naked faeries who assist a poor cobbler and his wife. In return, the now-prosperous craftsman makes fine clothing and shoes for his benefactors. This mutual generosity suits all parties, and the tale remains one of the best examples of fey/human cooperation in faerie history.

Cursed Heirloom by Stephanie Pui-Mun Law, www.shadowscapes.com

Stephanie Pui-Mun Law's faerie dangles her bare feet as obects of nature and fantasy float around her.

With the Industrial Revolution and standardized sizing, the village shoemaker soon found himself endangered. Even so, we still find echoes of cordwainery mystique today. *Sex & The City* lent a talismanic quality to Manolo Blahniks, while Nike Air Jordans enjoyed a brief, bloody "lift" through 1990s hip-hop culture. One modern luxury shoe manufacturer calls itself "Mephisto," while other shoes have been named "Incubus" (from Reebok), "Guinevere" (Dansko), "Remora" (Lacoste), and of course, "Cinderella" (Shenzhen Rose, among others). On a gruesome note, some women resort to cosmetic surgery in order to fit into stylish shoes. Don't any of these women actually read the Grimm version of *Cinderella?* If they did, they'd realize that it was the ugly stepsisters who mutilated their feet to fit the shoe ... and even then, the ruse didn't work.

Shoes can be dangerous, especially in faerie tales. Cinderella may have been exalted by her glass (or fur) footwear, but in the Grimm version of *Snow White,* her stepmother was forced to dance to death in hot iron shoes. The Korean film *Bunhongsin* links a surreal triptych through a cursed set of shoes, while Kate Bush's 1993 film *The Line, The Cross and the Curve* draws Kate into a nightmarish wonderland, borne by a pair of bewitched ballet slippers. That film, incidentally, was made as a companion piece for Kate's album *The Red Shoes.* Speaking of red shoes, folks often forget that Dorothy robbed her own ruby slippers from the corpse of the Wicked Witch of the East; it's not hard to see why that witch's

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Behold the Murmuring Sea by Natalia Pierandrei, www.nata-art.com.

Natalia Pierandrei's nymph presses her bare feet into a tree beside a foaming sea.

sister might consider Dorothy's existence an affront to the dead sibling's memory. (In the book, by the way, those shoes were silver. MGM turned them red to take advantage of the new Technicolor film process, so the similarities between those ruby slipper and Hans Christian Andersen's infamous red shoes are cinematic, not symbolic.)

Even good magic shoes can be problematic. In Jane L. Hoxie's story *The Fairy Shoes,* the obligatory faerie godmother, as a birth-gift for a newborn son, gives the mother a stout pair of copper-toed leather brogues:

"My present is not quite as shabby as it looks. Those shoes will never wear out, and besides, the little feet that have them on can never go wrong ... if you send him on an errand ... and he forgets and stops to play, those little shoes will help him to remember by pinching his feet and pulling and twitching at his ankles until he will be glad to go again."

An almost mystical morality of footwear sometimes defines the tale itself. In Andersen's *The Red Shoes,* a barefoot innocent desires and then obtains a glorious pair of crimson Morocco pumps. Little Karen suffers horribly, however, for her pride. (And for her creator's obsession with barefoot pubescent girls in pain, a theme he revisits in *The Little Match-Seller, The Snow Queen,* and *The Little Mermaid.*) Cursed by a devilish old soldier, Karen eventually begs to have her feet hacked off with an axe because those red shoes just won't stop dancing. Even after her dismemberment, the ghastly shoes haunt Karen. It takes piety, repentance, and death before the poor kid escapes those wicked shoes. Like *The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf* (also from Andersen), Karen finds herself punished by shoes that epitomize her selfish pride. She would have been better off going without, or giving them away like Gerda in *The Snow Queen,* who's rewarded in turn for her courage. As a reindeer says:

"I can give her no more power than what she has already. Don't you see how great it is? ... How well she gets through the world barefooted? She must not hear of her power from us; that power lies in her heart ..."

The poor Match-Seller, on the other hand, finds her reward only in death. Losing borrowed slippers in the snow, she suffers ferocious cold for wearing footwear that's "too large" for her; yet in that suffering, she's saved from the poverty of this life. If such symbolism seems contradictory, it's because it often is. Shoes reflect either pride or practicality, and while prophets may go barefoot, so do slaves, hedonists, savages, and whores.

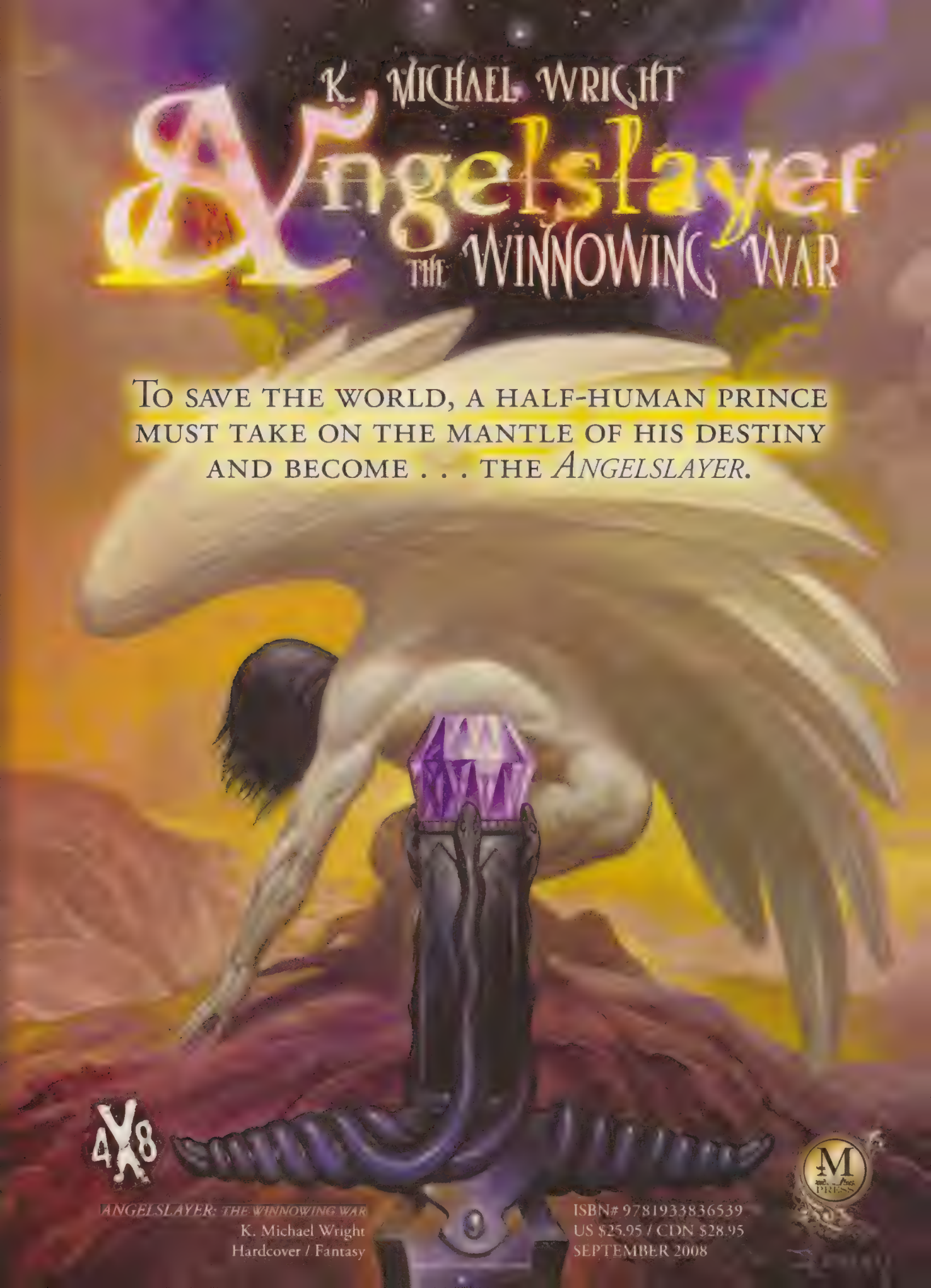
My first crush was a barefooter girl. So was my first wife, whom I met in a medievalist group. She never brought shoes to Renaissance fairs, but taught me how to appreciate the kiss of wood and concrete. To us, they became sacraments of life.

Feet seem intimate in ways that hands do not. Often soft and usually covered, the sole of a foot spends most of its time facing downward, toward the ground. To reveal bare soles —as John William Waterhouse does in his paintings *Pandora* (1896) and *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1893)—betrays an almost shocking familiarity. Among many Chinese, it's a grave insult to show one's soles among company, and as recently as 2008, Indian tennis star Sania Mirza faced criminal prosecution for propping her bare feet up next to the national flag. While the soles of the Buddha may be religious icons, the soles of barefoot girls (and guys) become fetish objects. Where intimacy goes, outrage often follows. One could "catch" lycanthropy, for example, by drinking from a wolf's footprint, and when witch-hunters pricked or burned suspected diabolists, certain torments involved the soles of feet.

An amount of degradation also applies to shoes and feet. To polish, fit, or kiss someone's shoes, after all, you must kneel before them and caress their lowest body parts—those closest to whatever they happen to have stepped on ... or in. Such acts can be seen as debasement, supplication, and—once again!—both at once. To fit Cinderella with her magical shoe, royalty (or its representative) first bows to a filthy commoner. The foot-washing Christ chastised his followers afterward, saying, "The servant is not greater than his master" (John 13:12). Witches were said to have kissed the Devil's hoof in obeisance, and Eleanor Farjeon, in her 1908 poem *Pan-Worship,* declares:

"The Pagan in my blood, in me
That yearns back to nature-worship, cries
Aloud to thee! I would stoop to kiss those feet,
Sweet white wet feet washed with the earth's first dews."

Ah, yes—sex! The foot, bare and otherwise, has a long erotic history. A survey posted at *www.geocities.com/gungesurvey/fetishstats* estimates that foot fetishism may be the most prevalent sexual kink. According to an article published by Roger Dodsen in *The Independent* in 2007, a study at the University of Bologna declared that "feet and objects associ-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PRESS

ated with feet were the most common target of preference." Unsurprisingly, this element seems most prevalent in cultures where shoes are expected to be worn, and often appears to be a subtle way of appreciating nudity in situations where bare flesh was, or remains, taboo.

Erotically, bare feet combine all those elements of vulnerability, rebellion, earthiness, intimacy, hedonism, and innocence. Such overtones come through clearly in the tales of Andersen and the paintings of Pre-Raphaelite-artists and their peers. The "stunners" who modeled for this group—particularly Lizzie Siddal, Fanny Cornforth, Annie Miller, and Jane Morris—epitomized the Sensual Faerie Woman. She might be a mortal Ophelia or an enchanting Circe, but she was almost inevitably barefoot ... and, more often than not, a lover/muse to the artists who portrayed her. Nor was this preference limited to the Pre-Raphaelites; Romantics like Francisco de Goya, Symbolists like Gustave Moreau, Decadents like Henry Fuseli, commercial artists like Alphonse Mucha, radicals like Pablo Picasso, idealists like Maxfield Parrish, and sensual malcontents like Norman Lindsay all portrayed the erotic (and occasionally disturbing) symbolism connected to bare or unusual feet ... usually in the context of myths or faerie tales.

Contradictory symbolism intensifies when you add sex to the equation. In certain tales, like *The Red Shoes*, *The Snow Queen*, or *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, shoes reflect virginity, its loss, and the ownership of sex and little girls who grow up. Sometimes, though, we don't want to grow up. In P.J. Hogan's film retelling of *Peter Pan* (2003), the children literally hover on the brink of puberty, barefoot among landscapes that recall the ripe sensuality of Pre-Raphaelite artwork ... with all the undercurrents this similarity implies. Although innocent, their journey spins them closer to the edge of adulthood than anyone, especially Peter, seems ready to go.

The rougher edge of sensuality appears during "The Tale of the Cinnamon Shoe," from Catherynne M. Valente's marvelous *In the Cities of Coin and Spice*. Here, the Dancing-Master—who is, in actuality, that pair of cinnamon shoes—alludes to such traditional hazards when he tells Solace, the Firebird's Child:

"I see you go bare-shod. This is most likely extremely sensible. Shoes are no end of trouble for girls, that tribe you seek in the dark. How many have danced to death in slippers of silk and glass and fur and wood? Too many to count—the graveyards, they are so full these days."

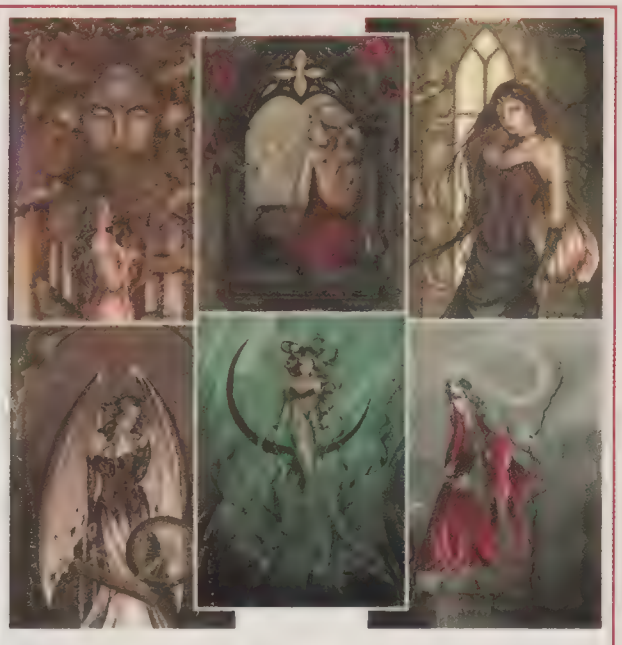
His warning is appropriate ... for it applies as well to him.

When faerie tales grow up, we call them "myths." Somehow, that seems more respectable. Certain myths, like those of Oedipus or Diarmait, present injured feet as reflections of adult sexual aberration. In *The Seven-Story Tower: A Mythic Journey Through Time and Space*, Curtiss Hoffman declares: "The substitution of feet for genitals is often present ... The wounding of the hero in this part of the body is very common in mythology, and usually refers to a sexual dysfunction."

This, perhaps, is the downside of potency. Philoctetes is bitten by a snake; Achilles is shot in the heel. Poor Oedipus probably gets the worst deal of them all; he's subjected not only to torture, abandonment, incest, and fate but also to being referenced ad nauseam by rabid Freudians.

On a more distressing level, the "lotus gait" adored by Qing Dynasty sex manuals justified the pinyin tradition, wherein the feet of young Chinese girls were wrapped so tightly that bones and muscles deformed. This fetish mirrors the more grotesque elements of the Cinderella myth, those infernal red shoes, and the brutish sentiment that women should remain "barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen." (A saying attributed, in paraphrase, to Arkansas Representative Paul Van Dalsem during the early 1960s.) Certainly, this "lotus-foot maiden" would seem appealing for her lack of freedom. Like the human slaves in the novel *Elvenbane* (by Andre Norton and Mercedes Lackey), her vulnerable feet would keep her from straying too far.

Such sentiments would appall free-soled heroines like McKinley's Lissar, Cramer's Mara, Jane Lindskold's Firekeeper, or Patricia McKillip's Rois Miller. These untamed characters


From the mistress of fantasy, here are twelve of Jessica's favorite picks from the Myth and Magick galleries of Enchanted Art. Includes Wiccan sabbats. X-Large 11x28, thirteen month wall calendar. $14.95

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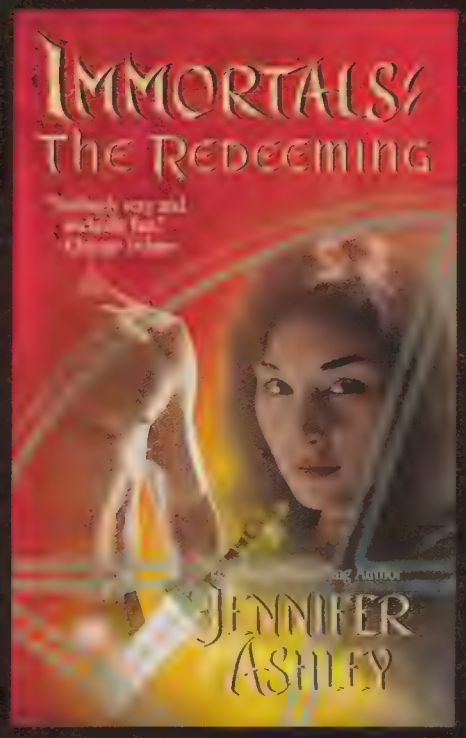

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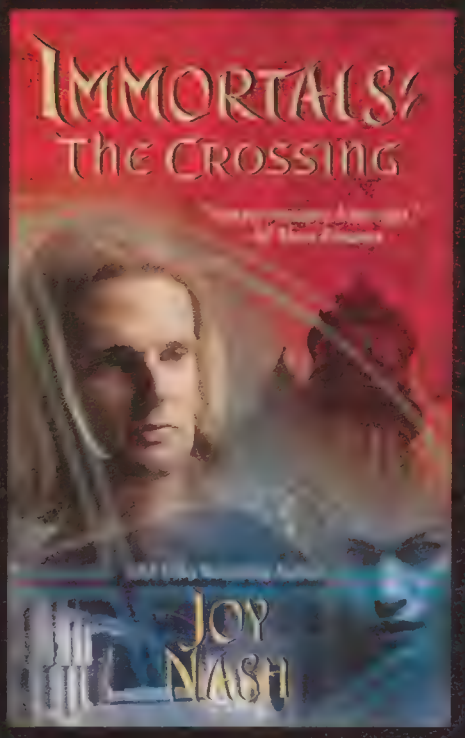

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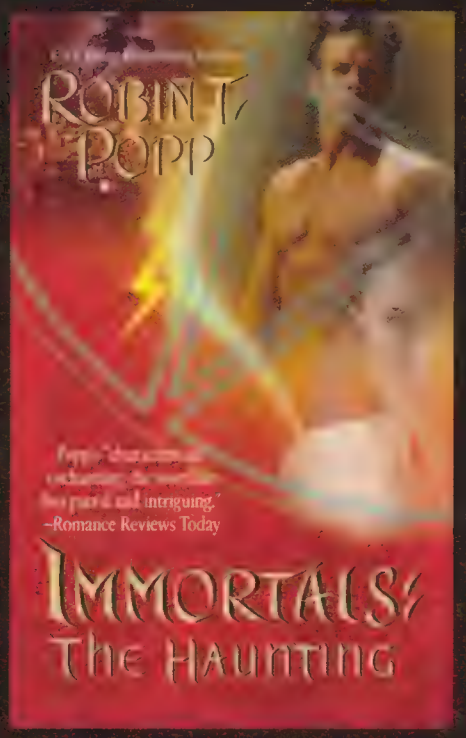

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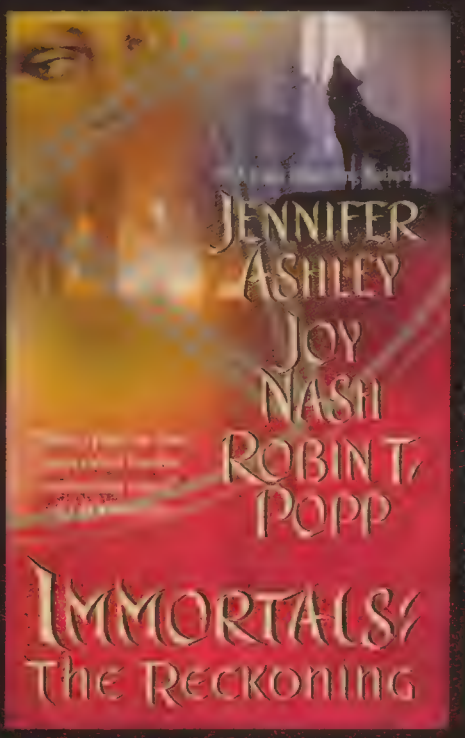

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choose to remain literally "in touch" with their surroundings. Like Marina from *The Butcher's Wife* (1991), Gillian from *Practical Magic* (1996), Jane from various Tarzan films, or Esmeralda from Disney's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), these women seem enchanted with their world's rough vitality. Wolf-raised Firekeeper considers shoes a sign of human weakness, and Rois gets chided gently for her wild ways:

"Barefoot. And with rose-petals in your hair. You look like something conceived under a mushroom."

The elemental connotations are clear: these ladies might be mortal, but they're hardly civilized! No wonder Francesca Lia Block lets Beauty grow wild in the company of her "Beast":

"Beauty began to change. Her hair was almost always a tangle ... she was almost always barefoot—there were hard calluses on her soles. Her senses were so sharp that she could smell and hear things she had never known existed before. This was the happiest she had ever been in her life.

"Wanna go for a barefoot walk in the woods?" So asked my friend the Magnolia Fairy. Having just picked me up at the airport during a tour for my newest book, she drove us both to the mountains where she lived. Shortly thereafter, we padded down a narrow, winding trail. Feet in the soil, we flirted, moved close. As we kissed, it started to rain. I couldn't have written the scene better myself.

Later on, dried and eating ice cream, we laughed. As it turned out, I had written it. Chapter One in that very same book featured an encounter between a curious young man and a barefoot girl in a faerie grove. I preferred the reality, though. For my birthday that year, Magnolia reprinted that passage in icing on my cake.

Our "good neighbors" creep, pad, thump, and cavort through mortal imaginations on many kinds of feet. Some folk, like Amy Brown's sly gamines, prefer striped socks,

Further Reading

Books and Stories

"The Little Mermaid," "The Red Shoes," "The Snow Queen," "The Little Match Seller," and "The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf" by Hans Christian Andersen (1836-1859)

"She Sells Sea Shells" by Paul Darcy Boles (from *Mammoth*, DAW, 1984)

Tarzan of the Apes and other Tarzan books by Edgar Rice Burroughs (1914+)

Maria of the Cello, Maria Celtic Shamaness, Maria (10th Anniversary), and *Maria: The Summer Country* by Dennis Cramer (now single: Oni/Apple McClain; Eros Comix, 1995, 1998, 2001, and 2002)

Someplace to Be Flying and "The Moon Is Drowning as I Sleep" by Charles De Lint (Tor, 1998 and Archive, 1993)

"Zreya's Tricks" by Gordon Dewhurst (from *Amazons II*, DAW, 1982)

Green Angel by Alice Hoffman (Scholastic, 2005)

The Seven-Story Tower: A Mythic Journey Through Time and Space by Curtiss Hoffman (Basic Books, 2002)

"The Fairy Shoes" by Jane L. Mowry (from *A Kindergarten Story Book*, Haystack, 2003)

The Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling (1894)

Through Wolf's Eyes and the other Firekeeper books by Jane Lindskold (Macmillan, 2001+)

Magic or Madness by Justine Larbalestier (Penguin, 2005)

"The Barefoot Woman," adapted from Appalachian folklore by Evelyn McCoy and Craig Dominey (2002)

"The Gray Wolf" by George MacDonald (1871)

Winter Rose by Patricia McKillip (Ace, 1996)

Donnelin by Robin McKinley (Ace, 1992)

The Enchanted Addler by Lila Mehta (Ulmer, 1987)

The Elvenbane by Andre Norton and Mercedes Lackey (Tor, 1991)

The Legend of the Lady Slipper by Margi Preus and Lise Lunge-Larsen (Houghton Mifflin, 1999)

The Serpent Slayer and Other Stories of Strong Women by Katrin Tchana and Trina Schart Hyman (Little, Brown, 2000)

The Orphan's Tales: In the Cities of Coin and Spice by Catherynne M. Valente (Bantam, 2007)

From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers by Marina Warner (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996)

The Wood Wife by Terri Windling (Macmillan, 2005)

Any of the many versions of "Cinderella," "Allerleirauh," "Donkeyskin," "The Elves and the Shoemaker," and "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," best known from collections by the Brothers Grimm

Poems

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" by John Keats (1819)

"The Beggar Maid" by Alfred Tennyson (1833-1842)

"Goblin Feet" by J.R.R. Tolkien (1915)

"The Barefoot Boy" by John Greenleaf Whittier (1855)

On the Web

The Barefoot Path in the Western Contemplative Tradition, Parts I & II by Ken Rice, http://world.std.com/~rice/plain/bf1.html and http://world.std.com/~rice/plain/bf2index.2.html

Fire Raphaelite Art Legends, Lore and Ladies http://www.spiralbox.com/raphaelart

TriviaNew.com, http://www.triviaNew.com/Trivi/Folklore.htm

Wikipedia: Barefoot, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barefoot

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while the sylphs of Stephanie Pui-Mun Law drift along barefoot. Other faeries stomp around in literally hob-nailed boots, like the redcaps of Matt Wagner's *Mage* comic sagas (1986-86 and 1997), or pick their way through the wood on "light" feet, like Keats's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1819). Shod or not, the nymphs of Waterhouse and the demons of Doré are recognizably human, yet unquestionably Other. That primordial connection to the earth marks their nature, and when they break it—as does Puss-in-Boots—such creatures grow closer to the realm of Man.

Elemental beings, like Charles De Lint's Crow Girls or the desert spirits of Terri Windling's *The Wood Wife*, often go unshod upon the land. Is it any wonder Tolkein's hobbits travel without boots? Elemental people frequently do the same, like the feral wildlings of Alice Hoffman's *Green Angel*. In *Prospero's Books* (1991), Peter Greenaway's surreal adaptation of *The Tempest*, the fey characters go barefoot and nearly nude. The human characters, in contrast, dress themselves in bulky boots and layers of ornamental garb. Miranda, meanwhile, reflects all elements; she wears "human" yet ephemeral garments and drifts along unshod, placing her at the borderland between realms of Man, Nature, and Other.

The previous "footnotes" apply also to the faerie folk—doubled if not squared. Faeries can be as silly, rebellious, erotic, proud, or graceful as any human being, and those traits often show through from the knees on down. Traditional folklore brims with crazy-footed creatures: satyrs and harpies, centaurs and yetis. Beneath apparently human clothing, goat-hoofed devils and fox-legged kitsune lurk. These animal appendages betray the uncanny nature (so to speak) of their hosts; even when the feet themselves look normal, a curious trail of pawprints or smoking split-toed tracks can reveal the presence of the fae.

If feet "ground the soul," then the Fair Folk have curious souls, indeed. Baba Yaga's hut strides on massive chicken legs; Pan dances on rank goat feet. Papa Legba hobbles about on twisted legs, while Kali dashes Shiva (who has large, distorted feet) beneath her heels. In old storybooks, Mother Goose often appears with a webbed foot or two; like the Queen of Sheba, who bore one bestial leg, her exotic nature marks her as something more, yet less, than human. The antipodes described by Pliny have eight toes on their backward tootsies, and they're in good company. The sex-changing ovda (Finnish forest-spirits), faceless duennes (Caribbean ghosts of unbaptized children), and red-haired curupira (Tupi boy-spirits who ward the wilderness) share those backward-pointing feet. Japanese tengu stalk on bird-like talons, while bakemono have no feet at all. The most unfortunate folks, however, must be the African aigamuxa: their eyes rest in the soles of their feet, and to see they must lie on their backs and kick. The trickster Jackal blinded the aigamuxa by goading them to chase him, then pouring tobacco in their path. Oedipus would be proud.

In Trinidad and Tobago, folks avoid La Diablesse, a devil-woman who appears as either a beautiful Creole girl or a wizened crone with one rough hoof. She wears long dresses to conceal her feet, which never quite touch the ground. In San Pedro, be advised that El Sisimito and his kin are out there, waiting. This fellow has no knees, and he walks with a stiff, awkward gait. He and his kind fear water, dogs, and dancing. If a male sisimito looks into the eyes of a man, that man will die within a month; if he looks into a woman's eyes, however, she'll live at least that much longer. That longevity, however, might not be pleasant. Sisimito and his kind have been known to abduct and rape members of the opposite sex. To escape these brutal creatures, legend says you must dive into water, run in circles, or strip naked and dance. Supposedly, the sight of a nude dancing human sends El Sisimito into severe, sometimes fatal, laughter. I'm glad I was hiking in America. The strangest faeries here are Bigfoot and the Jersey Devil, who leaves horse-like hoofprints when he's not flying around with his wings.

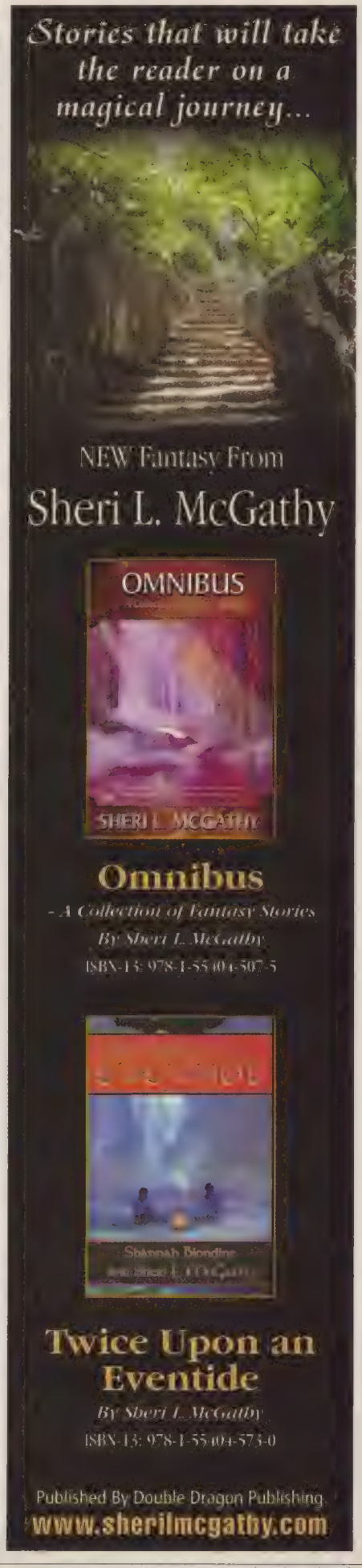
Some faeries lack the legs, let alone the feet, with which to "stand up for themselves" in man's world. Sibilla, in the medieval tale *Guerino il Meschino*, lives underground in a rich and beautiful domain; on Saturdays, however, she turns serpentine from the waist down. Like her legendary cousins Mèlusine and Ondine, Sibella is eventually betrayed and ruined by a mortal man's love; their human extremities are replaced by fish-flukes power and even more love. Only through silence and a horrible sacrifice could she walk or dance on land:

"... you will feel great pain, as if a sword were passing through you ... You will still have the same floating gracefulness of movement, and no dancer will ever tread so lightly; but at every step you take, it will feel as if you were treading upon sharp knives, and the blood must flow."

The sexual symbolism, in all its voluptuous guilt and shame, is obvious to anyone, female or otherwise, who knows what sex or gender is. Although we have a long way to go before we reach "happily ever after," some things have thankfully improved since those days "once upon a time."

We were introduced to each other by a Firebird's Child: a capering satyr and a silver-haired witch. At the festival, we danced ourselves dizzy on joyous bare feet. She drew me off to a faraway land, and I went gladly. We don't need ruby slippers in our Emerald City, and the magic in our hearts burns as bright as hot iron shoes. ❧

I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.
John Keats, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*



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By Resa Nelson

This fall's TV season has a variety of new shows for fantasy fans.

BELOW: Sookie Stackouse's boyfriend is a vampire in HBO's True Blood. *J.J. Abrams's* Fringe *begins with an airplane. Producer Sam Raimi brings us* Legend of the Seeker, *an epic fantasy series. INSET: KITT is back in NBC's* Knight Rider.

Remember last fall? The 2007 TV season had barely begun when the writers' strike shut down all but the reality series. In some ways, this fall is a reboot. At the same time, a handful of brand new series have entered the mix. First is HBO's ***True Blood***, one of the most highly anticipated fantasy series in years.

Alan Ball (TV's *Six Feet Under*) was early for a dental appointment one day and decided to go browsing in a bookstore instead of waiting in his dentist's office. That decision was the catalyst for *True Blood*, a new series about vampires (that premiered in September) based on the series of novels by Charlaine Harris. "It was just a little paperback," Ball says. "And on the cover, the tagline said, 'Maybe having a vampire for a boyfriend wasn't such a good idea.' I thought it was kind of funny. I started reading it that night, and I couldn't put it down. And the minute I was done with it, I wanted to read the next one. And I really got addicted. It's just such a fun world, and she really nailed so many things: They're very sexy, they're hilarious, there's a lot of interesting sociology. I'm from the South, and it was a very authentic look at the South. It's the kind of book you think, 'I'm going to read one chapter before I go to bed, and you read six.'"

In the world of *True Blood*, everyone knows that vampires exist. "They've come out of the coffin, so to speak," Ball says, "because of the development by a Japanese biotech firm of synthetic blood for medical purposes, which the vampires claim fulfills all of their nutritional needs. So they've organized, and they're struggling for assimilation and for equal rights."

Vampires insist they no longer need to hunt humans, but a lot of people don't like the idea of known vampires living openly among them. Religions and governments worldwide are outspoken about vampires. However, people are still making up their minds about vampires in Bon Temps, a small town in Louisiana.

"There's a lot of gray area," Ball says about the world of *True Blood*. "The vampires are just like humans. Nobody's a hundred percent good, nobody's a hundred percent bad. There's also the aspect that an entire subculture springs up around the vampires. There are people who are called 'fang bangers,' who basically just want to hook up with vampires because apparently sex with vampires is really good. Vampire blood is kind of the hot black-market drug. If you ingest vampire blood, it's like a combination of ecstasy and Viagra—it gives you incredible strength. But it's also incredibly dangerous and incredibly addictive."

About the setting, Ball says, "It's a vampire show that's taking place in

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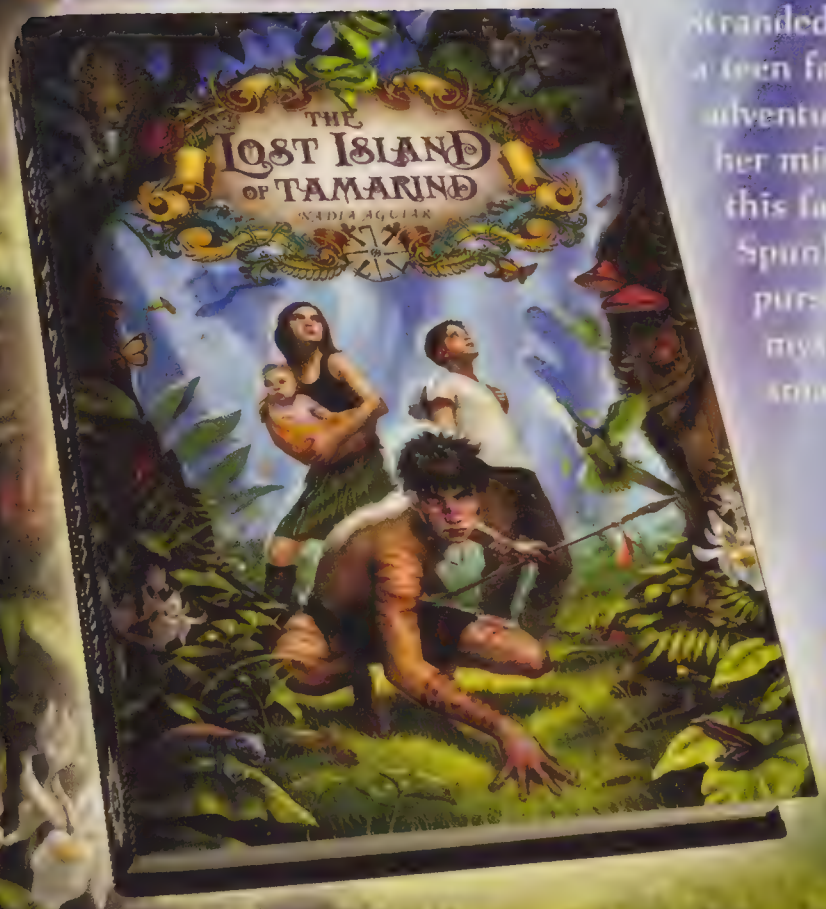
An enchantress who steals children...
Villagers at war...



Stranded on a lost island, a teen faces [illegible] adventures searching for her missing parents in this fantasy cliffhanger.... Spunky kids, perilous pursuits and [illegible] mystery make for a smashing good read."
—Kirkus Reviews

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BBC AMERICA'S *PRIMEVAL* BRINGS A NEW TWIST TO TIME TRAVEL

During the past few years, BBC America has evolved into a force to be reckoned with when it comes to fresh, new fantasy and horror series on TV. It has given us the likes of *Hex, Torchwood, Jekyl, Robin Hood,* and the original version of *Life on Mars* (the American version is currently airing on ABC). If you haven't seen the new series *Primeval* yet, check your local listings.

The story begins when Helen Cutter (played by Juliet Aubrey of *The Constant Gardener*) races through the parking lot of a closed store. She bangs on the enormous plate glass window, but the clerk on cleanup duty is plugged into his headphones and turns away. What he doesn't see is the dinosaur chasing her.

Eight years later, we meet Professor Nick Cutter (Douglas Henshall of *Angels & Insects*), who believes his wife is dead because she vanished and her body was never found. Nick is a scientist specializing in the investigation of gaps in the evolutionary record. He teaches at a British university, aided by his research assistant Stephan Hart (James Murray). One morning they're cornered by an enthusiastic and geeky student, Connor Temple (Andrew-Lee Potts of *1408*), who shows them a grainy photograph of what appears to be a dinosaur on the cover of a tabloid newspaper. Although Nick and Stephan laugh it off, Connor twists their arms and convinces them to go with him to investigate the area where the photograph was taken. They discover a large truck that has been shredded near the Forest of Dean.

This throws Nick for a loop, because his wife vanished in this forest eight years ago. He's still wracked with guilt, because he'd promised to investigate the forest with her but changed his mind at the last minute when they argued. The last time he saw Helen, he was angry with her and he still blames himself for her disappearance.

Meanwhile, London zookeeper Abby Maitland (Hannah Spearritt of *Seed of Chucky*) is a reptile expert who has just lost her funding. When she receives a photograph from a boy of an unusual lizard he's found in the Forest of Dean, she immediately investigates. The lizard is unlike any she's ever seen before. They explore the forest and the boy stumbles upon an anomaly that acts as a doorway between our reality and another period of time on Earth. The unusual lizard is a baby dinosaur that walked into our reality through that doorway. Abby bumps into Nick and his team in the forest, and they soon join forces, along with Claudia Brown (Lucy Brown of *Minotaur*), a junior official from the Ministry of Science and Technology determined to keep what they've learned a secret and keep tabs on this newly formed team of monster hunters.

Series co-creators Tim Haines and Adrian Hodges worked together on *Arthur Conan Doyle's The Lost World* and decided the idea of meeting the creatures from our planet's past was something they wanted to explore further. Their goal was to use modern technology to create believable CGI creatures and use them in a story with interesting characters that explores how humans might really react when faced with such creatures.

"I really liked the ambition of the script and knew that people were going to have to be at the top of their game to make it work," says Henshall. "That really appealed to me and I thought it would be extremely interesting to see what was involved in a show of this magnitude. But chiefly it was just because I really liked the character. I thought it would be really interesting to play someone like Nick."

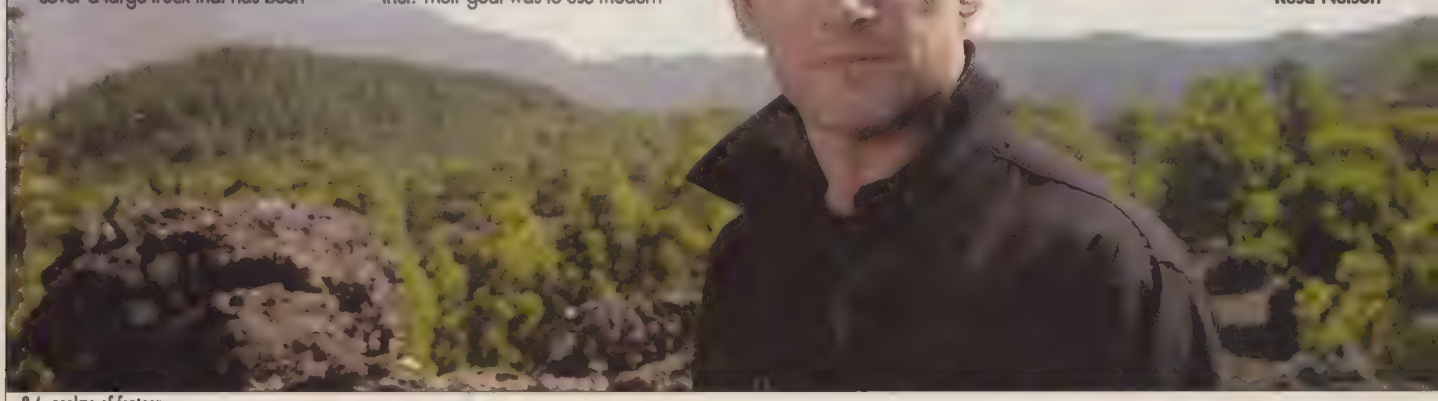
In the first episode of *Primeval*, Nick believes he catches a glimpse of his missing wife, only to see her vanish. In the next episode, another team member sees Helen, too, and relays a message from her to Nick.

"'Reluctantly optimistic' would probably be the best way to describe Nick," Henshall says. "He is someone who has such passion for his work, but I think he's built up a false gravity. The fact that his wife has been missing for eight years has understandably had quite an effect on him. It's always there and permanently means that a part of him is somewhere else. Helen, like Nick, is a scientist, but her approach was rather different from his. She was far more interested in being visibly successful in a way that he just wasn't. It's the same thing in every profession. There are some people who do what they do because of their love for the work. And then there are some people who do what they do because they want the fame and notoriety. And that's where the difference between Nick and Helen lies. He's happy to do it because he loves everything about what he does, even the everyday, mundane stuff. But Helen was very much of the mind 'unless I can discover something that nobody else has done and be seen to be doing that then I'm not really interested.'

"When he finds out that his wife is still alive and running around, it naturally has quite an effect on him—he begins to discover a lot of things about Helen that are very difficult for him to accept. Not only is she not dead, but he very quickly realizes that she had the chance to come back and tell him but never took the opportunity. She just left him to grieve for her. Even worse, she is totally unrepentant and unapologetic for what she has put him through. She's utterly ruthless about her actions and it's that hardness which throws him considerably."

Because an anomaly tends to stay open for only a short period of time, Nick's team is constantly on the lookout for new anomalies that act as doorways to different periods of time. In other words, it's not just dinosaurs they're chasing. Nick speculates that it's quite possible that the monsters from ancient cultures that we think are nothing more than myths could come through those doorways.

- Resa Nelson



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Cheryl Fortin & Lynn Sanders
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US $25.95 / CDN $28.95
DECEMBER 2008

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such a mundane location. It's not New Orleans; it's not Anne Rice. One of my rules is: I don't ever want to hear opera music in the show, ever. We're staying away from the Baroque things. We're staying away from the standard, supernatural blue light. We're staying away from vampires having strange contact lenses. We're staying away from any sort of special effects that become the focus. I just want to give my actors fangs and let them act. What is it like to be immortal, to have lost everybody you love? To yearn for your humanity?"

Joshua Jackson of Fringe

Deanna Russo and Justin Bruening of Knight Rider

But *True Blood* isn't just about vampires. The main character is very human. Sookie Stackhouse (Oscar-winner Anna Paquin of *The Piano* and the *X-Men* movies) is a roadhouse waitress who learned in childhood that she can read other people's minds. She hates her ability because it makes her feel alone. Sookie's mind-reading talent scares everyone, and this makes her an outcast. But everything changes when vampires enter the picture. "Everybody thinks she's crazy," Ball says. "She has no social life because of this, and then she meets a vampire. And because, technically, he has no brainwaves, she doesn't really hear his thoughts. So for the first time in her entire life, she can relax and be herself and not be on guard about hearing people's private, innermost things. And then there's a huge array of other characters; it's a really fun show. I remember when I was first pitching it, I said, 'This is popcorn TV for smart people.'

"It's very sexy, and it's very funny. There's a lot of dark humor. It certainly goes places that I've never seen a series go before. It's not as existentially exhausting as *Six Feet Under* was, maybe, but ultimately, it's similar terrain in that it's really just exploring the human condition ... and the vampire condition, since vampires are not really human anymore."

Ball is used to creating his own work from scratch, but he's had no qualms about adapting Harris's novels. "In a lot of ways, an adaptation can be easier," Ball says. "One of the great things I discovered once we started turning Charlaine's books into a series is that her books are so successful because those stories work. The books are narrated from Sookie Stackhouse's point of view ... and we're just sticking to her story. Now, the other characters in the world that don't really appear in the books—except when they're in her story—we're taking them and creating new things for them to do. But in a lot of ways Charlaine has done a lot of the heavy lifting already by creating this world and these characters."

Another new series is ***Fringe*** (FOX) from

HARRY POTTER FANS WILL HAVE TO WAIT!

You've probably already heard the news: the release date for *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* has moved from November 21, 2008, to July 17, 2009. So what's behind the eight-month delay?

It might have begun with an article published in the August 8 issue of *Entertainment Weekly* reporting that while the summer movie seasons of 2007 and 2008 have been highly successful, next summer doesn't look so promising. In fact, it's looking pretty dismal. Last summer's movies hauled in $9.7 billion in ticket sales, thanks to blockbusters like *Spider-Man 3* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*. This past summer kept riding that wave. At press time, *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man*, and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* had earned at least $314 million each. *Entertainment Weekly* reports that because the threat of an actors' strike threw a wrench into the movie-making production machine long ago, we're likely to suffer the consequences next summer. The magazine pointed out that some of the most promising films are currently slated for release this coming spring, and that few movies with any promise have been scheduled for next summer.

Six days after that article was published, Warner Bros. Pictures announced its decision to move *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* to a summer release date.

Alan Horn, president and chief operating officer of Warner Bros., said, "Our reasons for shifting *Half-Blood Prince* to summer are twofold: we know the summer season is an ideal window for a family tent pole release, as proven by the success of our last Harry Potter film, which is the second-highest grossing film in the franchise, behind only the first installment. Additionally, like every other studio, we are still feeling the repercussions of the writers' strike, which impacted the readiness of scripts for other films—changing the competitive landscape for 2009 and offering new windows of opportunity that we wanted to take advantage of. We agreed the best strategy was to move *Half-Blood Prince* to July, where it perfectly fills the gap for a major tent pole release for mid-summer."

Officials confirmed there are no problems with the next Harry Potter film. Because this franchise runs like a well-oiled machine, there's every reason to believe them. Jeff Robinov, president of Warner Bros. Pictures Group, said, "The release date change does not alter the production schedule for this or future Harry Potter films. Post-production on *Half-Blood Prince* was completed on time, and the studio's release plans for the two-part *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* will not be affected by this change. We know Harry Potter fans are eagerly anticipating seeing the final chapters unfold onscreen. In fact, the good news for them is that the gap will now be shortened between *Half-Blood Prince* and the first part of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*."

But was it good news when the front office broke the news to the filmmakers? Producer David Heyman said, "When Jeff Robinov explained the rationale behind moving the release date of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* to July 2009, it was immediately apparent that this offered us the potential to reach the widest possible audience. I am extremely proud of this latest film and of the work of David Yates and our incomparable cast; I believe we have developed and pushed the series further still. We are all looking forward to sharing it with Harry Potter fans around the world, even if we have to wait just a bit longer."

Director David Yates (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*) also took the news in stride. Yates said, "It has been a joy to work on *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Dan, Rupert, and Emma and all our returning young cast continue to blossom, and our new cast members bring fresh color and life to Hogwarts. Even as we put the finishing touches on this latest film, we are already beginning preparations on the final two films—we start filming in February—and I am excited to bring this remarkable series to the exciting and moving conclusion its loyal fans deserve."

Stay tuned. Next August's *Realms of Fantasy* will include a report from our visit to the set of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*.

- Resa Nelson

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The cast of ABC's [illegible]

Marley Shelton and Rufus Sewell of CBS's Eleventh Hour

creator J.J. Abrams of *Alias* and *Lost* fame. When FBI agent Olivia Dunham (newcomer Anna Torv) investigates the strange remains of everyone inside an airplane that landed at a major airport, her life takes on new twists and turns. She seeks the help of a brilliant scientist, Dr. Walter Bishop (John Noble, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*), who is institutionalized and can only be reached with the help of his son Peter (Joshua Jackson, TV's *Dawson's Creek*). As Olivia digs deeper, she discovers that the bizarre remains on the airplane represent the tip of the iceberg of a disturbing mystery.

On CBS, ***Eleventh Hour*** is a new series based on a British mini-series. Rufus Sewell (*A Knight's Tale*) plays Dr. Jacob Hood, a brilliant scientist who serves as a last resort resource for the FBI on peculiar cases. Hood is passionate about science and equally passionate about protecting its secrets from anyone wanting to benefit personally from them.

NBC has revamped its successful 1980s series, ***Knight Rider***, which stars a talking car named KITT (Knight Industries Three Thousand) that teams up with its human driver, Mike (Justin Bruening of TV's *All My Children*) to fight crime. In addition to looking like the coolest car on the block, KITT comes equipped with an artificial intelligence that can hack into any computer system. The car boasts weapons on par with those of a jet fighter. Finally, KITT has the powers of a transformer—the car's body can change into the shape of other vehicles and use holographic imagery.

One of last year's new series, ***Life on Mars*** (ABC), is getting a second chance. After present-day New York police detective Sam Tyler (Jason O'Mara of TV's *The Closer*) is hit by a car while chasing a criminal, he wakes up in 1973. Without today's technical conveniences, he's is anxious to find his way back to his life in 2008. *Life on Mars* is the American version of the BBC series.

Other returning series include *Pushing Daisies* (ABC), *Ghost Whisperer* (CBS), and *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (FOX). And stay tuned for a series that's likely to debut sometime this season on FOX: Joss Whedon's new series, *Dollhouse*, starring Eliza Dushku (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). ❧

When a god desires a mortal queen... Can her champion save her from her fate?

Fate of Camelot

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Robin McKinley

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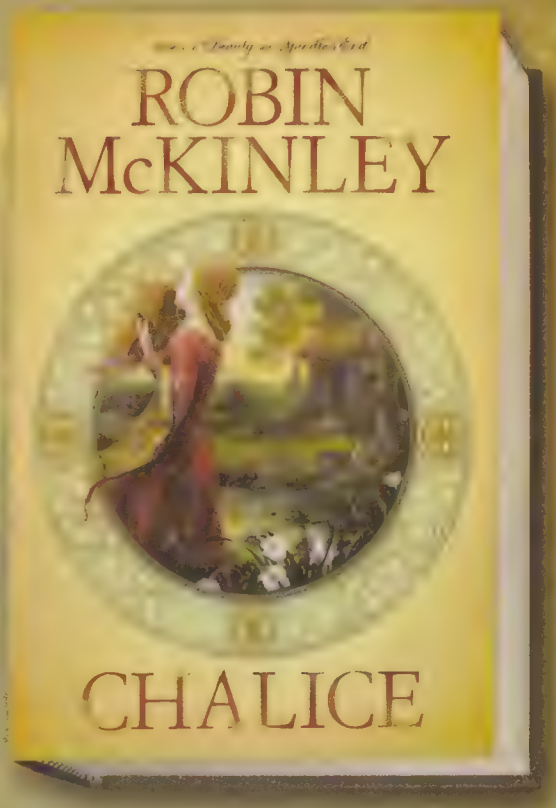
"McKinley is a master of fantasy writing."
—*Kirkus Reviews*



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—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

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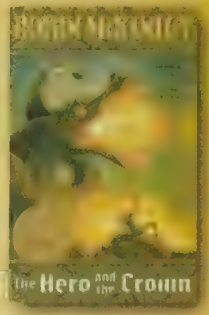

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By Paul Witcover & Jeff VanderMeer

Literary influences abound in Galen Beckett's *The Magician and Mrs. Quent.*

Galen Beckett straightforwardly acknowledges four literary influences in his first novel, ***The Magicians and Mrs. Quent*** (Bantam, New York, trade papaerback, 502 pp., $23.00, ISBN: 978-0-553-58982-5): Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, and Charlotte Brontë, a quartet that tells a prospective reader much of value about the style and subject matter of this engrossing, accomplished fantasy. For some reason, however, his three strongest models are less overtly confessed: Henry James, whose classic ghost story, "The Turn of the Screw," is more or less directly lifted for the novel's fraught middle section, "Heathcrest," gets a tip of the hat in the novel's title, with the name Quent suggesting that of James's malign ghost, Peter Quint, and Susanna Clarke, whose *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* also finds an echo in the old-fashioned, matter-of-fact formalism of Beckett's title, as well as in the novel's setting, the island nation of Altania, which is Regency-era England in all but name. As for the third model, I'll get to him below.

>> Stephen King to Judge SHOMI Video Book Trailer Contest

Dorchester Publishing and Circle of Seven Productions have teamed up to present a contest offering a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for amateur and professional filmmakers who also love books. Participants will create book trailers based on their favorite novel in the SHOMI series of modern-day fantasy fiction. The best trailer—as selected by internationally bestselling author Stephen King—will be shown at a movie premiere in New York City as well as a theater in the winner's home market.

The contest will provide a creative outlet for the filmmakers' vision while ultimately allowing the winner to showcase his or her talents before a potential audience of tens of millions of people through Circle of Seven's distribution relationships. "We're thrilled to offer filmmakers a means to broadcast their gifts," said Brooke Borneman, director of sales and marketing for Dorchester, "and hope that the contest gives the winner a platform that will propel his or her film career to new heights."

Book trailers—which are similar in style, content, and technique to movie trailers—are a powerful and increasingly popular method for communicating why a particular novel or series of novels is a 'must read.' A memorable short film can visually highlight a book's most compelling elements and draw viewers into the story and the author's universe, making a prospective reader want to know more.

A groundbreaking line of speculative fiction that combines the best elements of the fantasy, thriller, science fiction, cyberpunk, and romance genres, the SHOMI imprint has been hailed by reviewers for its genre-blending, high-velocity action-adventure stories and emotional impact.

"SHOMI books have received comparisons to films ranging from Underworld and *Resident Evil* to *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*," said Borneman. "The cinematic quality of the books and the sheer physicality of the storytelling are what make the SHOMI universe a natural for filmmakers to explore."

Contest entries should consist of 90- to 105-second videos for one particular SHOMI novel. To assist contestants in the creative process, Dorchester has provided tools such as high resolution cover art, author photos, plot synopses, review citations, and the SHOMI logo on their website. All creative content not provided on the site—including music, script, video, and images—must be original.

Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc., and Circle of Seven Productions will not be held liable for any contest entries regarding copyright infringement. Entrants agree to bear full legal and financial responsibility should video content be questioned. Video submissions are the property of Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc. and may be edited and used at their sole discretion.

To participate, entrants must upload trailers onto MySpaceTV or YouTube and send a link to the trailer to Shomithetrailer@dorchesterpub.com between July 21, 2008, and December 30, 2008. Contestants must complete and enclose the Contest Release Form with the notification of their video submission. Contestants may submit more than one trailer.

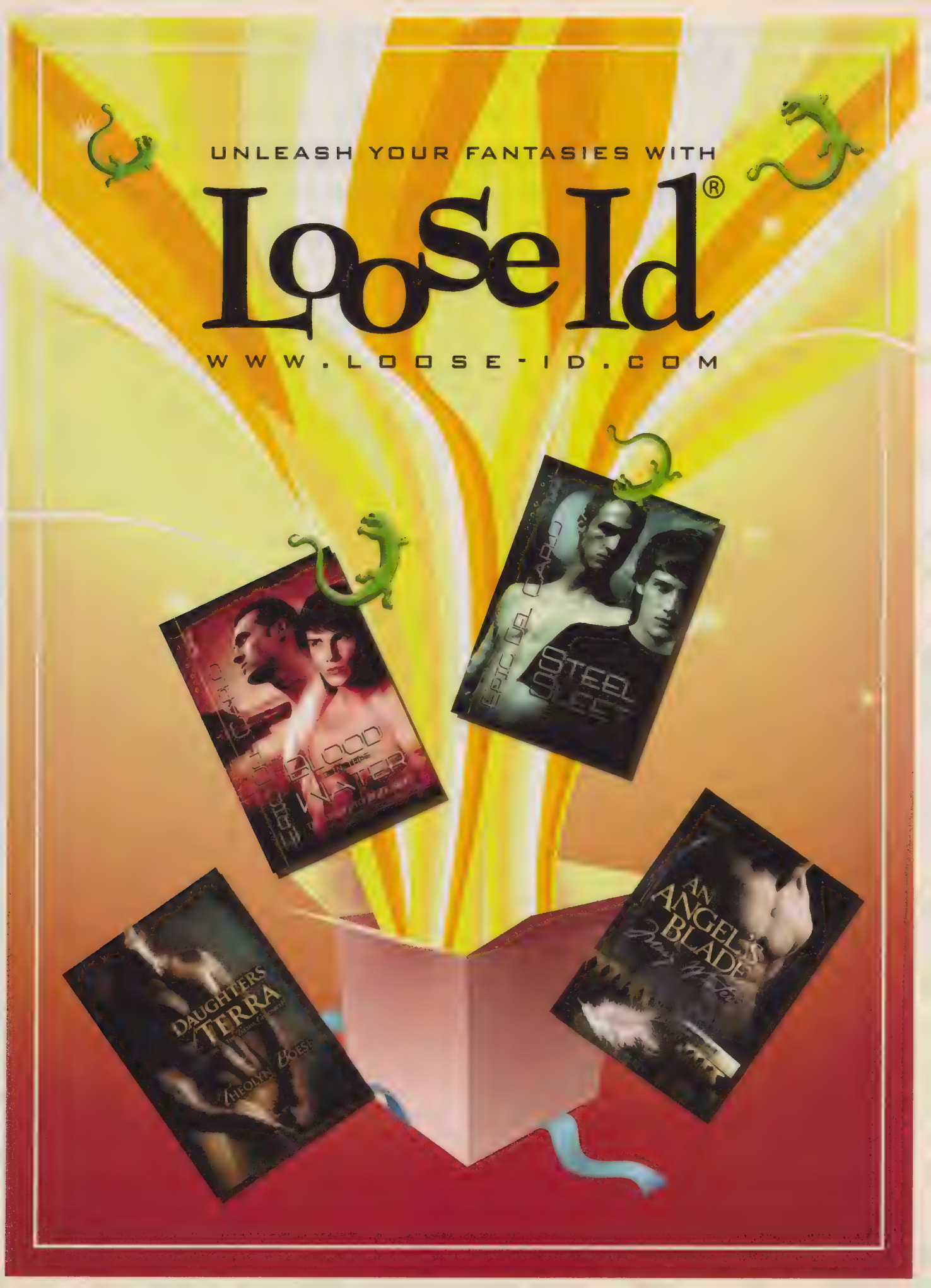
Each video entry will be evaluated by Dorchester Publishing's internal team of judges. Five videos will be selected and forwarded to Stephen King for final determination as the Grand Prize Winner.

The winning trailer will be chosen on or about February 1, 2009, and the winner will be notified by e-mail or telephone by March 1, 2009.

The Grand Prize consists of trailer premieres in New York City and the winner's home market for a two-week period. Distribution of the trailer will also include 200-plus social media, retail, news, and search engine sites.

The Second Prize consists of a $500 USD gift certificate from Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc. that may be redeemed at www.dorchesterpub.com or by calling 1.800.481.9191.

For more information on SHOMI and complete rules for the contest, visit www.shomifiction.com. ❧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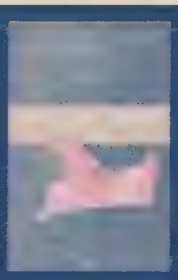
BY MICHAEL JONES



Out of the Wild, by Sarah Beth Durst, Razorbill, June 2008. The Wild, the sheer essence of all things fairy tale, is back, and this time it's not playing fair. Julie, Rapunzel's daughter, has just gotten used to having her father around, when someone kidnaps Sleeping Beauty, prompting the gallant Prince to fly to the rescue, Julie in tow. As their quest takes them across the country, they find themselves inadvertently committing acts of fairy tale heroism, each new event giving the Wild that much more strength. It's up to Julie, an ordinary girl in an extraordinary world, to prevent the Wild from conquering America. From New York to Graceland to Disneyland, modern life and fairy tales collide with unexpected results. Clever and highly inventive, this sequel to *Into the Wild* is full of heart and depth as it re-imagines the old, familiar stories and breathes new life into the characters and tropes.

The Dragon Heir, by Cinda Williams China, Hyperion, August 2008. The reappearance of a vastly powerful magical artifact helps to kick the war between the various factions of the Weirguilds into high gear, with everything coming to a climax in the sanctuary town of Trinity, Ohio. As the various characters seek to fulfill their agendas and fulfill their destinies, some will make the ultimate sacrifice, and everything will be decided by the mysterious Dragon Heir. This is it for the characters introduced in *The Wizard Heir* and *The Warrior Heir*, with magical and non-magical societies colliding in the conclusion of this epic trilogy. Unpredictable and fascinating to the last page, with plenty of magic, action, and character-defining moments, this is definitely a worthy wrap-up to the series.

Ink Exchange, by Melissa Marr, HarperTeen, April 2008. Disgruntled by her problematic family and unsatisfying day-to-day existence, all Leslie wants is to change her life for the better, When she gets a beautifully intricate tattoo, she

feels things are finally improving. What she doesn't realize is that the tattoo has a magical significance, and she's being drawn into a complex power struggle between several of the Faerie Courts, used as a pawn to harvest mortal energy for the Dark Court's nourishment. With her life spiraling out of control despite her best efforts, her friends unable to fully protect or warn her of the dangerous, and several Fae battling for her affections, only Leslie can make the right choices, not just for her, but for the Fae who have invaded her life. A darkly rich tale of hard choices and seductive pleasures, of subtle magic and immortal creatures dwelling alongside unsuspecting mortals, *Ink Exchange* is a worthy follow-up to *Wicked Lovely* and a great story in its own right.

Flora's Dare, by Ysabeau S. Wilce, Harcourt, September 2008. Still determined to become a ranger like her hero Nini Mo, Flora Segunda sets her sights toward learning the magical language of Gramatica. This leads her into a whole new series of adventures, such as fighting tentacled horrors, defying her father, falling through time, outwitting an infamous killer, and learning some of the city's best-kept secrets … including some about her own family. With the fate of the city hinging upon whether she lives or dies, Flora's going to have to get creative, just like a ranger would. But does she have what it takes to complete the ultimate ranger dare, and cheat death itself? Her life will never be the same, no matter how this affair turns out. The sequel to *Flora Segunda*, *Flora's Dare* is easily one of the quirkiest, most imaginative fantasy stories to hit the shelves this season, and a thorough treat for everyone. Flora is a character with plenty of spirit, her personality shining through on every page, and this is a setting that demands even more exploration, and soon.

Gone, by Michael Grant, HarperTeen, June 2008. Without warning, everyone fifteen and older vanishes from the small town of Perdido Beach, California, and everywhere else within twenty miles of the local nuclear power plant, including an exclusive prep school catering to troublesome teens. Cut off from the rest of the world by a strange energy field, the kids are left to fend for themselves and form a new society, one threatened by indecision, inexperience, and ruthless power struggles. Worse still, animals are mutating, an alien intelligence lurks in the dark, and certain kids are developing strange superhuman abilities, to be used for good, or evil. With people disappearing as they reach their fifteenth birthday, time is running out for them all, but internal fighting may destroy them first. Imaginative and captivating, *Gone* is a tense thriller, highly reminiscent of early Stephen King and hard to put down. I can hardly wait to see where Grant takes this storyline from here.

Dead Is The New Black, by Marlene Perez, Harcourt, September 2008. When Samantha Deveraux, Nightshade High's head cheerleader, adopts a vampiric outlook and fashion sense, Daisy, the only nonpsychic in her family, becomes entangled in a bizarre mystery that involves her reluctantly joining the cheerleading squad and frequenting trendy clubs. Little does she know that whatever's preying on local girls may decide to make her the next victim. One thing's for sure: it's turning her entire world upside-down as she reconsiders her place in the social scene. *Dead Is The New Black* is a slyly amusing, twisted tale where nothing is what it seems to be, turning high school stereotypes sideways and introducing a fascinating new setting. I'm going to enjoy this series, and hope to see more of Daisy and her world soon.

Vamps, by Nancy Collins, HarperTeen, July 2008. In Manhattan, when night falls, the vampires come out … and go to school. At least that's the case for teenage blood-drinkers like Lilith Todd, who rules the social scene at the exclusive Bathory Academy with the rest of her clique. However, it's instant hatred when she runs afoul of Bathory's newest transfer student, Cally Monture, who supposedly comes from a inferior bloodline. Now the claws are out, literally. But can the two mortal enemies work together when the vampire hunters start coming out of the woodwork, or will stakes become the new fashion accessory? With its rich setting and intriguing storyline, I enjoyed *Vamps* a lot more than I thought I would. It's fast-paced and fun, and I'll be sure to check out future installments in this series.

Heck: Where The Bad Kids Go, by Dale E. Basye, Random House, July 2008. A bizarre accident kills Marlo Fauster and her brother Milton, sending them to Heck, the horrible afterlife where they're tormented for their sins on Earth. Their classmates are cruel, their teachers range from Lizzie Borden to Richard Nixon, the food is revolting, and the principal is truly evil. But Marlo and Milton aren't taking the prospect of eternity in Heck lying down, and they immediately start plotting escape. But can anyone really win free of a place like this? Alternately thought-provoking and darkly comic, *Heck: Where The Bad Kids Go* is a whimsical, strange sort of story.

The novel moves between three main characters. The first among equals is Miss Ivy Lockwell, one of three sisters who live on the barest edge of gentility in the Altanian capital city of Invarel (London), their mother obsessed with finding her daughters a match that will raise their precarious station, their father, meanwhile, a magician rendered non compos mentis due, it is commonly supposed, to a dangerous spell gone tragically awry. Next is Mr. Dashton Rafferdy, a Wildean figure in terms of decadent social pose and razor-sharp wit, if not sexual preference, the dissolute son of Lord Rafferdy, a powerful nobleman whose services to the crown are as mysterious as they are apparently indispensable. Third is Eldyn Garritt, drinking buddy of Dashton, son of a father whose financial excesses have left him in a frightening social free-fall, one that is all the more terrifying because he is the sole support of his innocent younger sister, the beautiful Sashie.

All three of these characters harbor secrets—secrets unknown to others and, in some cases, to themselves. Altania's original inhabitants worshipped the Wyrdwood, vast stands of trees endowed with a kind of sentience and raw magical ability. Even now, though Altania has long since been civilized, with whole forests of Wyrdwood consigned to flames or sorcerously put to sleep and fenced in, there are rumors of violent eruptions in which the aboriginal trees wake from their bespelled slumber to take vengeance on humans, events popularly known as Risings, which the more modern-thinking citizens dismiss as superstitions. But the trees of the Wyrdwood, wild as they are, have always been susceptible to the influence of certain human women, called witches. Ivy Lockwell may well be one such woman. Dashton Rafferdy, meanwhile, much to his own surprise, discovers through the intervention of Mr. Bennick, a social acquaintance rumored to have once been a magician himself, that he is a lineal descendant of House Gauldren, one of the oldest and most honored magical families in the country; like it or not, his magical inheritance, once awakened, cannot easily be set aside ... nor can the responsibilities that go with it. Finally, Eldyn has always possessed the handy talent of cloaking himself in shadows; this talent will bring him to the attention of the gypsy-like Siltheri, actor-illusionists who draw upon a third branch of magic that makes use of darkness and light.

These three characters are drawn together by various conspiracies that span the gamut from the matrimonial to the revolutionary. Eldyn and Dashton, thanks to a chance meeting with the Lockwells' boring cousin, Mr. Wyble, become acquainted with the Lockwell sisters, and a special friendship, which may be considerably more, blooms between Ivy and Dashton despite the difference in social status. Less pleasantly, a handsome highwayman named Westen seeks to use Eldyn in a plot against the crown, blackmailing him by

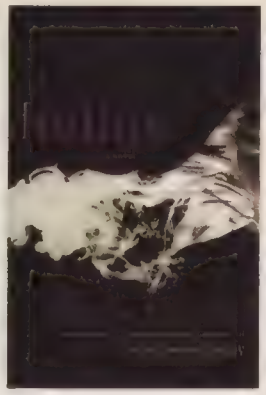
means of all-too-credible threats against Sashie. This same highwayman pursues a vendetta against Mr. Quent, one of Lord Rafferdy's chief lieutenants. Mr. Quent once knew Mr. Lockwood well, and as the widowed father of two young children, a boy and a girl, is in need of a governess to take charge of the children at his remote estate; in his hour of need, this brooding, romantic figure, a cross between Heathcliffe and Mr. Darcy, turns to Ivy Lockwood, whom circumstances soon propel into his orbit.

And speaking of orbits ... Beckett's most original notion is a solar system in which the orbits of the planets are so eccentric that the intervals of day and night are by no means fixed, although they are predictable, recorded in an almanac. Thus the hours of light, or lumenals, and those of darkness, or umbrals, are exceedingly variable; one day may feature a night of twenty or more hours, followed by a day of two or three, while in the next, the preponderance may swing toward the light. This is an undeniably cool idea, but there is no indication that Beckett has worked out the science behind his system. Need a fantasy be subject to natural physical laws? I think it must, if the sun rises and sets by other than mere caprice.

This is more than a quibble, because the orbits of the planets are even more eccentric than Beckett's characters realize—instead of eleven planets, the solar system possesses twelve, the last with a period of thousands of years. That all-but-forgotten body is now drawing near again, a baleful red star growing brighter with each umbral. Its reappearance spells disaster for the world ... but also opportunity for certain unscrupulous magicians belonging to a secret society, The Vigilant Order of the Silver Eye. And with the approach of this planet comes the influence of the third of Beckett's unacknowledged models: H.P. Lovecraft. With Altania threatened by apocalypse from above and revolution from below, it will fall to Ivy, Dashton, and Eldyn to maintain the status quo, however unjust it may be.

Beckett is a superior literary mimic; his stylistic evocations of the authors listed above are both keen and affectionate. And his characters are engagingly fleshed-out embodiments of familiar types. All of which makes *Mrs. Quent* an unusually well-crafted and multisourced pastiche, an inspired literary collage.

When the noted science fiction writer, poet, and critic Thomas M. Disch took his own life this past Fourth of July, it was hard not to see in the selection of that significant date one last acerbic review from this brilliant man of letters: a tersely devastating dismissal of post-9/11 America, indeed of contemporary life itself, in all its spectacular crassness and exuberant irrationality. Now comes Disch's final novel, ***The Word of God*** (Tachyon, San Francisco, trade paperback, 192 pp. $14.95, ISBN: 978-1-892391-77-3), and it begs to be read as a kind of corollary to Disch's suicide—or perhaps it's the suicide that should be viewed as a coda to the novel ... as inevitable and necessary (theologically speaking) as the crucifixion of another god more than two thousand years ago. Yes, "another god," because in this outrageous, ebullient quasi-memoir, Disch relates the circumstances surrounding his apotheosis ... and the efforts of all the dark forces of Hell to topple him from his throne—efforts that span time and space and find their embodiment in no less a literary frenemy than Philip K. Dick, himself no stranger to divine invasions. This gorgeously wicked, heartbreakingly sweet satire settles old scores and initiates new ones, skewering its subjects with intelligence and wit, yet never relinquishes the essential decency and large-mindedness that are the hallmarks of a truly exceptional mind ... something as rare on earth as it is in heaven.



Disch's final years were marked with tribulations worthy of Job. His literary efforts met with controversy at best and indifference at worst, while his ground-breaking science fiction masterpieces, of which my favorites among the novels are *Camp Concentration* and *On Wings of Song*, seemed all but forgotten, even within the genre (if people know Disch at all, it's probably for the movie based on his short story "The Brave Little Toaster"). To add injury to insult, medical problems had begun to impact the dignity and quality of his life, his house had burned down, his longtime partner had died following a protracted illness, and he faced eviction from his New York City apartment. Yet I can't help but feel it is too easy to explain his suicide simply as a response to these amassed provocations: an aberrant convulsion of despair, of madness. No. Disch was a man who joined an exquisitely refined artistic sensibility to a darkly twisted sense of humor; I prefer to see his suicide as a self-consciously creative act, one influenced by his daily circumstances but not reducible to them. In the proper context, can suicide be a work of art, or part of one? I would argue that for Disch, the answer was yes. I have no idea whether he wrote *The Word of God* with the intention of killing himself before its publication—though many lines in the novel can be interpreted that way, making it one of the longest, and certainly most artfully composed, suicide notes in history—but I don't doubt for a minute that the irony of the situation appealed to him, and that even in the grip of whatever unknowable emotions gained ascendancy in his final moments, some measure of artistic judgment, serenely aloof, looked upon the totality of the statement he was about to make and pronounced it good.

The Word of God is subtitled "Holy Writ Rewritten," and this accurately sets forth Disch's aim, or one of them: that is, to turn the tables on the religiously devout and proselytize the proselytizers, according himself the same infallibility that they ascribe to their god or gods. This is a useful goal, but not necessarily an enlightening or even entertaining one, as anyone who has slogged through recent best-selling screeds that propound an atheism of such joyless severity as to resemble the fundamentalism they so stridently decry. But Disch is too wise and expansive a writer to take this approach, and so what begins as a jovial rant quickly becomes something else: a strange and captivating blend of memoir, novel, short-story collection, and poetry chapbook whose pieces are assembled from published and unpublished work composed over the course of his illustrious career, linked by new material. Despite its often chatty tone, this is far from a hastily thrown-together paste-up job.

Many of the incidental stories here, which are more in the line of parables, are delightful on their own terms, such as a tale relating the experience of Jesus and Peter descending from on high for an incognito viewing of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*; the crucifixion proves a bit much for Jesus, though he does have high praise for the actor playing Judas. But as the book progresses, an encompassing narrative takes shape from these fragments, involving Philip K. Dick as a demonic agent assigned to terminate Disch's godhood by going back in time to murder his parents, one of whom turns out to be the great German writer Thomas Mann. Hey, if Christ could be the Son of Man, why shouldn't Disch be the Son of Mann?

Disch and Dick—the names are close enough to suggest a mirroring—had a somewhat fraught relationship, though I don't believe they were ever more than casual acquaintances. But secretly, Dick suspected Disch of having ripped off certain of his story ideas, and even denounced him in a letter to the FBI in 1972, a fact only revealed after his death; evidently this discovery sat poorly with Disch, who gets back at his paranoid predeceasor not by belittling him in fiction but instead by giving him the juicy part of Lucifer in his own *Paradise Lost*—that's a generous bit of revenge. As the devilish Dick, inhabiting the body of his preadolescent self, travels across the Depression-era United States like some malevolent Huck Finn in order to terminate the life of a libidinous Mann, *The Word of God* rises to heights of sublime wickedness.

Disch's generosity as a writer, as well as the keenness and breadth of his intellect, shine

forth in these pages to illuminate his life in a charming though at times almost unbearably poignant light. Here was a man of Proustian dimensions in an age of Paris Hiltons. For all the sadness at his passing, I mourned more the loss of any chance to get to know this wise, funny, angry man, or to ever read a new piece of writing by him. Yet one strange thing: in the weeks and months since his death, I and others have experienced palpable intimations of his enduring presence and interest. Not long ago, after turning my apartment upside down looking for a book, I whimsically "prayed" for Disch's assistance in locating it; I turned around, and there it was, in plain sight. Coincidence? As Disch himself puts it in *The Word of God*, and he should know: "Gods don't die, or if we do, we're resurrected before we've been forgotten."

Readers who know Haven Kimmel only from her best-selling memoirs *A Girl Named Zippy* and *She Got Up Off the Couch* are likely to have their minds blown by her extraordinary new novel, ***Iodine*** (Free Press, New York, hardcover, 240 pp., $24.00, ISBN: 978-1-4165-7284-8), a hallucinatory fever dream of a book whose sensual prose and psychologically harrowing subject matter reminded me of the lush archetypal landscapes in which Elizabeth Hand's fiction takes place—a fertile breeding ground of mythic potential wherein the primordial unconscious manifests itself in the waking world, with results that walk a razor's edge between wonder and horror.

Freud, Jung, and the contemporary analyst James Hillman are the tutelary deities of this novel, but Kimmel does a lot more than simply graft their psychological theories and insights onto a work of fiction. Rather, *Iodine* is like the raw material of a rich and appalling dream whose meaning may be unlocked by the brave and diligent application of these theories and insights. It is a work of art but also self-consciously a work of analysis, and it's up to readers to make their way through a thorny thicket of tangled possibilities in which the present is never quite what it seems and the past is glimpsed as if through a fracturing kaleidoscope that warps to varying degrees everything it represents.

The novel's main character, Tracey Sue Pennington, a.k.a. Trace—who also goes by the name Ianthe Covington, lifted from a tombstone—is the product of what appears to have been an abusive childhood. Her mother, Loretta, afflicted with a bizarre religious mania, subjects Trace to years of secret midnight exorcisms, causing her to develop a compensatory attachment to her oblivious father, Colt, that crosses over boundaries into incestuous territory. Her siblings, Billy and Dusty Ann, are for some reason exempt from their mother's malign attention and as ignorant as Colt of the tortures Trace is enduring. Meanwhile, Trace encounters a familiar daemon of sorts, a big coyote called Cleonus that walks on its hind legs and gives her two gifts: a stone implanted at the base of her

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cranium and her best friend, Candy. All three—coyote, stone, and friend—may or may not exist, and they are by no means the only ambiguous elements readers are tasked with making sense of.

Now, fifteen years later, Trace is attending college under her assumed name and living in a ramshackle. abandoned house with her beloved dog, Weeds. Colt is dead, and Loretta has remarried an obnoxious businessman named Marty, who has designs on Trace. Billy has vanished for mysterious reasons. Candy lives nearby with her abusive husband and three children; also living close by is Dusty Ann, whose marriage to a crystal meth dealer has left her addicted and placed her children at risk. Candy believes herself to have been abducted by aliens and impregnated with a hybrid embryo, and what's more she is certain that Trace experienced something similar when she was a girl. Trace wants to help Candy and Dusty Ann, but her efforts are complicated by an intense romantic liaison she is embarking on with one of her professors, Jacob Matthias, an older man who stirs up dangerous memories of Colt and seeks to shape her in a creepy Pygmalion-like way even as he hides the truth about his previous wife and a child that seems to have inexplicably vanished.

Past and present converge violently as Trace is forced to confront truths she has long suppressed, but there are, in the end, no easy answers or happy-ever-afters here. The fantastic elements that Kimmel introduces into her narrative are too powerfully evoked to be entirely dismissed as the products of an unhinged mind, and a pervasive sense of eerie dread lingers beyond the final page, as if we have read only the first half of a fairy tale whose grim and bloody denouement remains to be enacted. If such is the stuff that gothic fiction is made of, then *Iodine* is gothic on steroids. It's a disturbing, riveting read from a writer who is part analyst, part shaman.

I've been a fan of Richard Parks's droll, deceptively light-hearted fantasy stories since I reviewed his first collection, *The Ogre's Wife*, back in 2003. The tales in that and in his subsequent, even better collection, *Worshipping*

GRAPHIC NOVEL REVIEWS

BY JEFF VANDERMEER

Flight: Volume 5, ed. Kazu Kibuishi, Villard, New York, NY, trade paperback, 360 pp., $25.00, ISBN: 978-0-345-50589-7.

Quickly becoming an iconic part of the fantasy comics landscape, *Flight 5* is anchored by recurring regular Michel Gagne, with "The Broken Path," yet another of his wordless adventures in the Saga of Rex. Our cute critter with a crystal in his forehead faces off against a variety of odd, vividly imagined alien creatures. These creatures include a purple-brown big-brained (with veins popping) entity with squinty eyes and a body half squashed platypus and half organic spatula. In terms of action, a sequence in which Rex's crystal helps explode an orbiting moon is better than anything comparable in cinema. With its mind-blowing sense of wonder and dynamic color palate, Gagne's creation gets Volume 5 off to a great start.

Moving from science fiction surrealism to historical realism with a fantasy element, Tony Cliff's "Aqueduct" has a Middle Eastern feel. It presents a riveting adventure tale of a flying sailboat and some determined enemies armed with bows-and-arrows. "Aqueduct" serves as a good transition to one of the more outrageous stories from a visual point of view: "The Dragon" by Reagan Lodge. Japanese-style battle between mecha-assassin and wily fox plays out on dark, snow-strewn streets. Lodge does an excellent job of integrating the sinister robot into the kinetic, fluid landscapes. The art updates and makes immediate the otherwise feudal feel of the piece. A second robot-based piece, "Karakuri" by Sonny Liew provides a nice counterpoint to "The Dragon." "Karakuri" uses a less realistic, more playful style. Its robots are believable in a whimsical way, but the pleasure for the viewer is in Liew's commitment to making things that look cool but would never work in real life.

Another, minor-key highlight is the editor's own "The Courier." Kazu Kibuishi has a way of making both fantasy and science fiction seamless, no matter how outlandish. In "The Courier," personal hovercraft bob above green-lit city streets and couriers like the protagonist must navigate through a maze of *Bladerunner*esque vehicles. It's a nice slice-of-future-life.

A Mark Ryden approach to art makes "The Changeling" by Sarah Mensinga more than a typical fairy story. The rich tones and subdued yet vibrant approach to color work especially well as a background for the eventual

Small Gods, are marked by a knack for taking familiar fairy tale tropes or patterns and up-ending them in unexpected ways. In the short story "A Time for Heroes," for example, a princess is kidnapped by an evil wizard, prompting the young woman's betrothed, a brave if headstrong prince, to set out single-handedly to rescue her. But though this set-up is well-worn to the point of being a cliché, in Parks's capable hands it unfolds with one surprise and shock after another, until what was old has been made new again, still charged with the mythic resonance of a good fairy tale but made more relevant to our own times. The evil wizard, one Tymon the Black, is more complicated than he seems; his actions are mitigated to an extent by the motives behind them, which are not evil at all but rather characterized by a desire to avert worse evils by committing lesser ones. Similarly, the princess, Ashesa, is far from a passive, helpless victim, while Prince Daras, her

knight in shining armor, his head filled with dreams of battlefield glory, proves more of a threat to Ashesa, and to the fragile peace among the Twelve Kingdoms, than Tymon. These witty, thoughtful stories had made me wish for a novel from their talented author, and now my wish has been granted, in spades, for Parks's first novel, ***The Long Look*** (Five Star, Waterville, ME, hardcover, 297 pp., $25.95, ISBN: 978-1-59414-704-3), is an expansion of "A Time for Heroes."

Of all Tymon's sorcerous skills, the most uncanny is a power—perhaps a curse—over which he has no conscious control: the Long Look. When the Long Look descends upon him, Tymon sees the future—usually a dreadful future that must be avoided at all costs—and sees as well what steps he must take to have the best chance of averting, or lessening, the looming disaster. Yet while these steps are clear, the connections between them are often murky, so that despite his knowledge of the

appearance of the titular character. Meanwhile, "Mountains" by Matthew Bernier is basically an excuse to draw a series of surreal fish—and I, for one, don't mind! Bernier has created some amazing images that I kept turning back to so I could admire them one more time.

But my favorite comic in *Flight 5* is "Igloo Head and Tree Head in Disguise" by

Scott Campbell. It follows the hilarious and insane adventures of monster-like creatures who indeed wear trees and igloos on their heads—along with small tanks, apples, delivery trucks, and dragons. Another creature has a whole stone bridge on his head! The wacky logic behind all of this, as it plays out, is as

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN AFRAID OF DEEP WATER, CAUSE I'D IMAGINE HORRIBLE THINGS I COULDN'T SEE LOOKING UP AT ME, WAITING TO GRAB ME AND PULL ME INTO THE DARKNESS

delightful as the oddly primitive yet sophisticated artwork. If you can look at a panel that features a monster with a tree growing out of his head (a girl is swinging on a tire tied to one of the tree's branches) without laughing ... well, you're made of stronger stuff than me.

Finally, "Seasons" by Frank and Frank may be the simplest comic included, with its careful, minimal use of color, but also among the most effective. It is a nonsentimental feel-good ending to the book.

The only inexplicable choice in *Flight 5* might be endless and, let's face it, boring "Beisbol 2" by Richard Pose, which has nothing new to say in either its story or its approaches to art. While reading this fifth installment, I also began to wonder why *Flight* now has a children's off-shoot in the new *Flight Explorer* series, because nothing included wouldn't appeal to a kid as well as an adult. However, these are small nits to pick considering the overall quality of this latest triumphant installment in an influential and imaginative series. ❧

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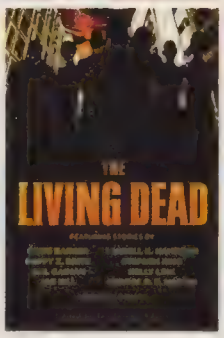
future, Tymon is almost always acting in partial ignorance, unsure if his actions will have the desired effect or create a future even worse than the one he has glimpsed. Because his visions have prompted him to acts of cold-blooded murder, albeit for the greater good, Tymon is wracked with guilt, and his sense of being a plaything for inhuman powers, chiefly a mysterious goddess called Amaet, granted just enough knowledge by her to bear responsibility for events he may not be able to influence, has left him with a fragile grip upon sanity. His acceptance, however grudging, of the burden laid upon him makes him a heroic figure, and his struggle to retain the humanity and bedrock decency that his actions, his knowledge, and his ignorance work unceasingly to erode gives him an appealing vulnerability. Despite his strength of character, however, it is clear that Tymon would long ago have become as evil as he is popularly supposed to be were it not for the influence of his friend and companion, Seb, a sharp-tongued, somewhat cynical dwarf who despite his size is an expert cook, tracker, spy, and fighter. The loving if barbed relationship between these two unlikely friends is one of the delights of the novel.

Because of events that transpire when Tymon and Seb kidnap Princess Ashesa, Prince Daras's bookish younger brother, Galan, has succeeded to the throne of Borasur and has inherited as well his brother's obligation to marry the beautiful young princess from neighboring Morushe, thus uniting the two kingdoms. But Galan's claim to the throne is not universally acknowledged, and among the dukes of Borasur, one in particular, Laras, has ambitions of his own. It is at this critical juncture that the Long Look abandons Tymon, leaving him dangerously in the dark. And speaking of darkness, a malevolent entity has been conjured from the primordial lightless void by an ill-considered spell and set loose to kill Tymon ... an entity whose appetite for slaughter may not be so easily satisfied. As Tymon desperately seeks to save himself, restore the Long Look, and prevent Laras from instigating a war, he will unlock a hidden truth about the Long Look that will challenge everything he thinks he understands about his life and his purpose. Suitable for young readers, but enjoyable by fantasy lovers of all ages, *The Long Look* is a strong step forward for Parks, a milestone in what hopefully will prove to be a long and successful career.

Paul Witcover



The Ant King and Other Stories, Benjamin Rosenbaum, Small Beer Press, Easthampton, MA, hardcover, 232 pp., $24.00, ISBN: 978-I-931520-52-2.

Benjamin Rosenbaum is a talented short story writer whose fiction always seems modern even while employing the most absurd surrealism. Although he's been up for awards, he's remained a peripheral figure in the field. This collection may change that because in *The Ant King and Other Stories* Rosenbaum shows off an effortless talent. Whether he's working with whimsical material as in the title story or creating a more serious tone as in "The House Beyond Your Sky," Rosenbaum's range is impressive. (Perhaps not coincidentally, the previously published stories appeared in a mix of genre and mainstream publications.) Even self-referential stories like "Biographical Notes to 'A Discourse on the Nature of Causality, with Air-Planes,' by Benjamin Rosenbaum," in which an avatar of the author appears, do not seem self-indulgent because Rosenbaum knows what weight each tale requires to be successful. A few missteps, like the inconsequential "The Orange," barely stick in the mind due to their brevity. *The Ant King and Other Stories* should get serious consideration come awards season.

Vicious Circle, Mike Carey, Grand Central Publishing, New York, NY, 437 pp., hardcover, $24.99, ISBN 978-0-446-58031-1.

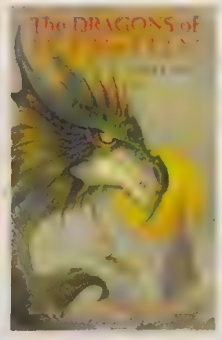
Mike Carey might be best known for his work on *Constantine* and various other comments, but he's quickly making a name for himself in the realm of supernatural detective fiction. *Vicious Circle* is the follow-up to his previous release *The Devil You Know,* and it continues Carey's cross-breeding of noir detective fiction with ghost/ghoul horror suspense. Succubae sidekicks and exorcisms are just part of the job. Once again Felix Castor must battle the supernatural to pay the bills. Once again, with a "missing ghost" case, he gets a lot more trouble than he expected going in. I wouldn't say the tropes Carey is using are all that new or different, but *Vicious Circle* is a superior example of this new subgenre because he's a very good writer. Anyone who likes noir fiction will enjoy *Vicious Circle,* and if you're in it for the beasties and the smell of sulfur you also won't be able to put it down.

The Living Dead, ed. Jon Joseph Adams, Night Shade Books, San Francisco, trade paperback, 493 pp., $15.95, ISBN: 978-1-59780-105-8.

Following up on the success of his prior anthology of post-apocalyptic fiction, *Wastelands*, editor Jon Joseph Adams gives us *The Living Dead*, which collects iconic zombie fiction by the likes of Clive Barker, Poppy Z. Brite, Neil Gaiman, Joe Hill, Laurell K. Hamilton, Stephen King, Kelly Link, George R.R. Martin, Joe Lansdale, Michael Swanwick, Susan Palwick, and many more. There are even two stories original to the anthology: the light-hearted "She's Taking Her Tits to the Grave" by new writer Catherine Cheek and a gargantuan, somewhat experimental novella by John Langan titled "How the Day Runs Down." The Langan is an audacious take on the play *Our Town*—with zombies—and well worth the price of the anthology all by itself. It's hard to find fault in almost five hundred pages of zombie stories, except that in its very diversity the book may not appeal to core zombie fans. In stories like Kelly Link's "Some Zombie Contingency Plans" the zombies aren't all that prevalent, for example. So go in forewarned: zombies literal and zombies figurative shamble through this anthology.

The Mammoth Book of Extreme Fantasy, Mike Ashley, Running Press, Philadelphia, PA, trade paperback, 562 pp., $13.95, ISBN: 978-0-7624-3383-4.

Depending on your definition of "extreme" you'll either find this reprint anthology scintillating or a bit of a snooze fest. The usually



reliable Andy Duncan gets things off to a somewhat silly start with his send-up of epic fantasy in "Senator Bilbo." It's trite stuff, and no more dangerous than the teaser text on the inside front cover of *Bored of the Rings*. Neither is Orson Scott Card's "Sandmagic" all that extreme, although as the editor tells us, he's arranged the stories from least to most extreme. Fair enough. I then opened the anthology to the middle and encountered Jeffrey Ford's "Boatman's Holiday," another non-extreme, if excellent story. By the time I encountered an old Moorcock Elric tale and a none-too-shocking novelette by Ted Chiang, I realized all that was necessary to enjoy this un-extreme anthology was to take a Sharpie, cross out "Extreme" in the title and write in "Interesting" instead. Because, taken on their own terms, the majority of the stories in this anthology are first-rate. However, there's nothing extreme about most of the content. The style of the stories is pretty much from the Invisible School, with the exception of the delightful "Jack Neck and the Worry Bird" by Paul Di Filippo. Neither is the subject matter all that unusual.

The Dragons of Manhattan, John Grant, Screaming Dreams, South Wales, United Kingdom, trade paperback, 359 pp., 12.99.

Available in the United States but published in England, *The Dragons of Manhattan* was originally serialized in *Argosy*, where it was hard to figure out the story's overall form. Now safely compiled between the covers of a book, the novel proves to be a fascinating modern take on traditional fantasy tropes. The conceit? Ancient shape-shifting dragons rule the world, and preserving the human species is pretty unimportant to them. Mixing politics in an America much like ours with a mystery revolving around one of the most powerful dragons, *The Dragons of Manhattan* has a compelling surface story but also works as a kind of satire of society. The juxtaposition of the modern with something as ancient as dragons shouldn't work, but in John Grant's skillful hands, it not only works, it works brilliantly. (I also highly recommend Grant's amusing and horrifying nonfiction book *Corrupted Science*, which should appeal to anyone who appreciates fantasy in the real world.)

Jeff VanderMeer

Just because something is an urban legend doesn't mean it's not true.

BY EUAN HARVEY ILLUSTRATION BY JADA FITCH

Harry and the Monkey

Urban legend: a modern story of obscure origin and with little or no supporting evidence that spreads spontaneously in varying forms and often has elements of humor, moralizing, or horror: Are there alligators living in the New York City sewer system, or is that just an urban legend?

Also called urban myth.
[Origin: 1970–75]
Based on the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, © Random House, Inc. 2006.

This is a true story.

I have three kids, all boys. Son number three is Harry. He's younger than the others by three years (he is four and a half when this story begins); he looks more like me, and he's a devious and unscrupulous manipulator—like all youngest children. He laughs a lot, cries a lot, breaks things a lot, and fights with his brothers a lot. He goes to kindergarten with all the other kids, plays football (well ... runs after the ball flapping his arms and howling with glee, anyway), enjoys twisting the arms and heads off his collection of cheap plastic action figures, and gets cranky when he's tired.

The reason I'm telling you this is simple: Harry's a perfectly normal kid. Average and unremarkable.

If you think about it, that makes what happened even more unsettling.

What if it's not only him?

What if it's all kids?

You've heard of the crocodile in the sewers, right? Kid gets reptile for present, reptile grows (as they do), kid gets bored, flushes it down toilet. Only ... the croc doesn't die. It stays down there, preying on rats and swimming around in the pungent dark. Getting bigger. And perhaps, as it grows, it tires of rats. And then one day, when it's down in the fetid gloom, just its evil little eyes above the surface of the water, it sees a splash of light: a man holding a flashlight. Next thing is a little v-shaped ripple, and the eyes draw closer to the puddle of light and the man wearing his bright yellow rubber boots. Closer, and closer ...

A nasty little image. And one that's recognizable to anyone from the West. The story may not be true—but it resonates.

But in Thailand, where I live, that particular myth isn't part of the culture. No resonance. Mention it in conversation, and you'll get a WTF? look. No crocs in the sewers here. At least, no stories about crocs in the sewers—but we'll come to that later.

There are urban myths in Thailand, though—just not the ones we have in the West. And like all urban myths, they've got a very nasty little core to them, a little splinter of horror embedded in the story, something that festers in your mind so that you absolutely must tell someone else.

The nastiest one I've heard is the *rot jap dek*.

See, there's this van. A black van, with shiny windows so you can't see in. And this van cruises round the main roads, and into the sois, and through the moobahns, and it's looking for children. What happens is this: the van follows a kid, and if the van sees that the kid is alone, then it silently (because the engine in this van is specially made to be very quiet) pulls up next to the kid, and the doors to the van quietly slide open, and pair of very long and very thin arms snatches up the kid, and pulls him (screaming, kicking) back into the thick darkness inside the van. Then the doors close, the van purrs off, and no one ever sees the kid again.

Unpleasant, right?

The trimmings to this story vary. Some versions sound plausible—if horrific. There's one that says the van is driven by Chinese organleggers, and the kids have their hearts, lungs, kidneys, and all the rest chopped out and sold on the black market. Less believable versions say it's Cambodians, the Khmer Rouge stealing Thai kids to raise them as guerrillas, Janissary-style. I've even heard it's a luk-chin factory, which has found out that human flesh makes its meatballs more delicious.

But though the semiotic crud the story has accumulated varies, the central element remains the same: a black minivan that steals children.

This is the *rot jap dek*.

Remember this. It's important, and if you're very unlucky, there may be a test. Black van: *rot jap dek*.

The most famous monkey colony in Thailand is in Lopburi. There, as in Delhi, monkeys scamper through traffic, beg (or steal) food, execute primal snatch-and-grab raids on unwary tourists, swarm over the Angkor-period ruins in the town center, and generally make a bloody nuisance of themselves.

There are however numerous other monkey colonies in urban areas in Thailand, some surprisingly close to Bangkok. One of these is at Don Hoi Lod in Samut Songkhram, about two hours drive from my house. Don Hoi Lod is on the coast—but if you're getting an image of palm trees and white sand, bin it. Just south of Bangkok, the coast of Thailand is swamp and mangrove forest. The "beach" at Don Hoi Lod is mud. Lots of mud, with masses of mangroves. So why go?

Well, crabs like mangroves. A lot. And so, it turns out, do other edible sea creatures. Which in turn means that Don Hoi Lod is famous for cheap seafood: crabs, oysters, tiger prawns, and fish—they're all there in abundance.

And so, for some reason, are monkeys. Whether the monkeys lived there before and the restaurants at Don Hoi Lod just encroached on their habitat, or whether the monkeys moved in to scavenge off the seafood leftovers, I don't know. What I do know is that Don Hoi Lod is crawling (scampering?) with monkeys.

So there I was, driving down the narrow road that leads from the Thonburi-Paktho highway. It's a holiday—the Day of Vesak, if I remember right—so the traffic's fairly heavy and we're just bimbling slowly along, not quite in a traffic jam, but not moving very fast, either. Hunger is making the boys grumpy, the air-con is giving me a headache, and the sun keeps catching the back windscreen of the car in front, making me wince.

And then Robert (son number one) does something unpleasant to Harry. I can't remember what exactly; I think it had to do with sweets and the denying thereof. Harry starts squalling and tugging on my shirt from behind, demanding that I intervene. Fon (my wife) snarls at Harry (she's got a worse headache than me). In response to this, Harry starts yelling, and the other two boys in the back start squabbling loudly.

In short, we're right at that stage familiar to every parent, that point just before you crack and start doing all the things that parenting books tell you not to.

However, right at that very moment, a monkey jumped up onto the hood of the car. It knuckle-walked to the windshield, then sat scratching its bottom and peering at me with benign interest.

I seized the opportunity thus offered. "Look, Harry! A monkey!"

Harry's mouth shut with a click of teeth. His eyes widened, then he scrambled forward, pointing at the windshield. "Monkey! Monkey! Daddy, monkey!"

The monkey yawned, showing yellow and rather alarmingly long teeth, scratched its rump, then ambled up the windshield and onto the roof, leaving a trail of muddy little pawprints up the glass.

Harry watched it go, then stared at the roof intently, as if he could see through the metal. After a few moments, he looked at me, then pointed to the roof and said solemnly. "Monkey." Then, in case his mother didn't understand, he helpfully translated it into Thai for her, "Ling."

For the rest of the day, Harry was easily distracted. Any sign of grumpiness, and I'd point at some random location and say, "Harry, look! The monkey! Can you see the monkey?"

Harry would spring to his feet, quivering with excitement and peer in the direction I'd pointed. If there did actually happen to be a monkey there, he'd stare at it, then shout, "Monkey! Monkey! Monkey! Daddy, monkey!" If there was no monkey there (as there most often wasn't), he'd look at me and ask where it had gone. So I said that he'd have to be quick, as monkeys were very shy and didn't like to be stared at by people.

But as it turned out, that last part only really applied to me, and not Harry.

This really is a true story. What comes below is from *The* *Bangkok Post,* Saturday November 10, 2007:

IN-DEPTH: MISSING CHILDREN

In 2006, more than 46,000 children were reported missing in Thailand, according to the two-year-old National Missing Person's Bureau. But as staggering as that number is, yet more alarming is the fact that this represents a year-on-year increase of 6% over 2005.

46,000. Now you think about that for a moment.

Monkeys creep me out. Really, they're just ... horrible. The first reason is that monkeys have very large teeth relative to the size of their head. Imagine a human whose canines are as long as the distance from the nose to the chin—about one-third of the length of the

head. Now imagine what it looks like when this person yawns.

Yes. Exactly. Just like that.

Second, monkeys have that whole almost-human-but-not-quite thing going on. Like their hands. They're almost human, but ... deformed. Yes, I know that they're not really deformed, but as a human, my frame of reference for nondeformed is human. Dog's paws? No, they're not deformed. They're not close enough to trigger the human interpretation. But monkey's paws, that's a different story. Close enough to human so that your mind goes click, and instead of looking at them as an animal, you're interpreting in terms of the human. And from that perspective, monkeys are deformed. Freaks. The thumb's all wrong, and the joints are off, and they've got that depressed forehead with dead little black eyes peering out from underneath. You look at their feet, and they're almost human.

Almost ... but not quite.

The Bangkok Post, Tuesday July 10, 2007

Samut Sakhon—Police announced they were scaling back their search for a missing 5-year-old girl yesterday, saying they would focus instead on tips on the girl's location. Sirikul Siriyamongkol was last seen on Sunday morning playing in the soi in front of the house her parents live in near Om Noi. More than 100 police officers and neighbors searched for the girl on Monday, making house-to-house enquiries as well as posting signs asking for help in locating her.

Like I said: it's all true. If they've found the little girl, there hasn't been a damn thing about it in the *Bangkok Post*. Of course, maybe the editor just decided the return of the kid wasn't newsworthy.

Maybe.

Om Noi is about five klicks from my house.

When I was young, my father had something called the "doolally." When he wanted to get rid of me and my brother, he'd go to the kitchen door, stare down the garden—sometimes shielding his eyes with his hand, as if staring off in the far distance—and he'd slowly say, "You know, I think that's a doolally down there." He'd pause, then he'd say to me and my brother, "Quick! Go and get him! The doolally's eating our apples! Quick! Run!" And off my brother and I would toddle, down the garden to the apple trees, there to search fruitlessly for the fabled doolally, which I always pictured as some variety of fat pink bird, rather like a dodo, only squawkier and with a silly-looking head.

My father fooled me for years with the doolally. To me, it was real, and it was my sacred duty to stop it from nibbling on our apples. I could see its foolish head, its watery eyes framed by long curling lashes, and I knew it had wobbly legs like a chicken. We tried everything, my brother and I: traps, sneaking down the garden rather than running, even building a hide and concealing ourselves in it as we waited for the doolally to arrive (I was unclear as to whether it flew—clumsily, of course, shedding feathers and veering wildly to and fro—or stalked along like a heron, high-stepping over the fence from the neighbor's garden).

And, as all men turn into their fathers, I ended up doing the same thing to Harry as my father had done to me. Only, instead of a rather silly-looking bird, Harry went chasing after a monkey.

I want you to picture a scene: It's a warm Saturday afternoon in the suburbs of Bangkok, the mango trees are whispering to themselves in the lazy breeze blowing through their leaves, kids are riding past my yard on their bikes whooping and hollering, and I'm sitting on my porch drinking a cold beer. Harry bimbles out of the house behind me and starts poking me with a fat finger. I look up, peer into the garden, then say slowly, "You know, I think I see the monkey over there." Harry runs to the porch rail, grips two of the railings in chubby hands, and peers into the garden. "There he is!" I say, pointing at the mango. "Harry! Go and get the monkey! Quickly!" And Harry races off, little legs twinkling as he races to find the monkey, which apparently hides behind the largest of the three mango trees in our yard.

This goes on for months before things start to change.

The first change was small. My wife—the long-suffering Fon—had bought a huge bag of live king prawns, and we were going to barbecue them. The prawns were sitting in a bowl of water about a foot away from me, and I was getting the barbecue ready. Right at that moment, Harry came up to the bowl, looked down, then squatted next to it with an expression of intense interest on his face.

If this was an M.R. James story, there'd be some kind of smooth monkey face poking out of the foliage, probably with its eyes tightly shut. If it was a Stephen King story, then maybe the monkey would step out from behind the palm and BITE MY FACE OFF!

Every parent knows that expression: It's the one that kids get just before they try and stick the fork in the electrical outlet. I tried saying "no," but Harry took no notice, and poked one of the prawns experimentally. I knew what was coming next, so I pulled out the big guns: "Harry! Look over there! The monkey! Go and get him!"

Harry glanced over his shoulder at the mango tree, then shook his head. "Monkey mai mi," he said. (The monkey's not there.)

"Yes he is!" I said. "Look! Oo! The bugger's eating our mangos! Go get him, Harry!"

"Monkey mai mi," Harry repeated. Then he pointed behind me. "Monkey yu ni." (The monkey is here.)

I turned round. Behind me was the Caryota Mitis—the Clumping Fishtail palm—I'd planted near the house. The Clumping Fishtail isn't a neat palm tree like the ones you see lining roads in Beverly Hills. This palm is more like a messy explosion in a frond factory. It's got dark green leaves that sprout from numerous subtrunks, and although I kept this particular Clumping Fishtail trimmed, it still had a thick collection of foliage, and mostly obscured the low wall behind it.

If this was an M.R. James story, there'd be some kind of smooth monkey face poking out of the foliage, probably with its eyes tightly shut. After a moment it would withdraw, quite possibly with a sinister rustle. If it was a Stephen King story, then maybe the monkey would step out from behind the palm and BITE MY FACE OFF!

But this is a true story. There was no monkey. Or rather ... I couldn't see a monkey.

From that point on, the routine was that I would point out the monkey, and Harry would tell me I was wrong and tell me where the monkey really was. This was amusing for a while, and then Harry changed it again.

So there I am, different afternoon, a couple of months later. I'm on the verandah. I hear the door slam and the lines of shells above it tinkle—this means Harry is coming.

I wait for a moment, and soon enough I become aware of a

solemn presence beside me. I look down, and there's Harry, blanket over one shoulder, half-drunk bottle of milk in one hand.

"What?" I ask, when Harry says nothing.

With immense dignity, Harry points to the Clumping Fishtail palm next to the verandah.

There is a short silence as I wait for Harry.

"Yes?" I say finally.

"Daddy, monkey," Harry says. "Monkey yu ni."

I blink. "What?"

Harry suddenly laughs, points to the palm tree, and says, "Daddy! Monkey yu ni! Monkey! Daddy, run!"

When I realize the cheeky little bugger has stolen my lines, I can't stop smiling. I rush after Harry, arms outstretched to tickle, and he shrieks in delight and runs indoors, waving his half-drunk bottle of milk above his head.

As I recall, I didn't actually look at the palm tree.

The very last change—right before the fecal matter hit the fan—was the most important. Some time after Harry had started pointing out the monkey to me, and suggesting that I run after it (little blighter), he had a nightmare.

My fault—he'd been watching a ghost movie, a rather nasty one, and now he was convinced that the headless ghost was coming for him. In fact, according to Harry, it was hiding behind the curtains above his bed, just waiting for me to leave so it could creep down and eat him. As it was a headless ghost, I attempted to point out the problems it would encounter in this endeavor (lack of teeth or mouth seeming to be the primary ones), but alas, Harry wasn't persuaded by my faultless logic.

I took him into our room (my wife's and mine), put out the small spare mattress, and made a nest for him. He wouldn't settle though. (The ghost had apparently followed him in, the nasty little sneaker.) After twenty minutes or so of bleary-eyed comforting, I hit on what I thought was a brilliant solution: I told Harry that the monkey would protect him. Harry went very round-eyed at this. I asked him where the monkey was (it being well-established by now that only Harry knew the location of the monkey), and without hesitation Harry pointed to the door of the bathroom.

"Monkey yu non," he said. (The monkey's in there.)

I said I wouldn't go in the bathroom, as I knew the monkey was shy, and I didn't want to scare him away. Harry agreed that would be a good thing, and I said that the monkey could protect him from the ghost, couldn't it?

Harry nodded, then promptly went to sleep.

I lay awake for some time, listening for ... something. I don't know what. I didn't go into the bathroom.

I sometimes wonder if things would have turned out differently (horribly) if I hadn't told Harry that.

But I did tell him.

Thank God.

The Bangkok Post, Saturday November 10, 2007

Samut Prakarn—Deputy Social Development and Human Security Minister Poldej Pinprateep called yesterday for a special task force to trace missing children by coordinating information from relevant agencies. He said that the authorities lack the resources to find missing children, many of whom are snatched by human traffickers and forced into working as beggars, laborers or sex workers.

Ekarak Lumchomkhae, head of the Mirror Foundation's information center, said that more than 650 cases of missing children have been reported to the center this year. The missing children have ranged from newborn infants to toddlers to children aged 9-12.

Mr. Poldej said a task force should be set up to supplement the activities of the National Missing Person's Bureau, which lacks sufficient staff to find missing people quickly. The task force must be able to find people quickly, he added, noting that the more time that passes, the slimmer the chances of finding missing people become. He was speaking during a visit to seven families of missing children in the Om Noi district of Samut Sakhon. Cholada Siriyamongkol is the mother of Sirikul, or Nong Yui, 5, who has been missing since July 8th. She says she has not lost hope, and believes her daughter is still safe.

Four months, and she says she hasn't lost hope. Now imagine it was your kid.

How long would it take you to lose hope?

My university shuts down from the first week in December until the first week in January. One week after my holiday started, Harry caught a cold. Fon and I talked about it, then decided to send him to school. It wasn't that bad a cold, just a sniffle.

A little after midday, when I was just settling down to my lunch (chopped papaya salad, minced catfish salad, steamed sticky rice, and a cold beer), I got a phone call from Fon. The school had phoned her saying that Harry was running a temperature and could she come pick him up? As Fon was having her hair done (again), I was volunteered to go and pick Harry up from the school. I pointed out that I was just sitting down to lunch. Alas, her hair proved to be of more importance than my lunch, and for the sake of continued domestic harmony, I ended up driving to the school.

I picked Harry up, drove back home, planted him in front of the TV with a bottle of milk and the DVD of *Monster House*, and went back to my lunch, which was now rather soggy and dispirited.

My house has an open-plan ground floor. Sitting at the dining table, you can see into the lounge where the TV is. You can't see it all—the stairs get in the way, but there's a clear view of the end of the couch and the sliding doors leading onto the verandah. The way I'd put Harry onto the couch meant I couldn't see him. I could hear the TV, but I couldn't see Harry at all.

I sat down and ate my lunch. I drank two bottles of beer—the large ones. A large bottle of Heineken contains 750ml of beer, with an alcohol content of 5.6%. This comes to 8.4 units of alcohol, about the same as four pints of lager in a pub. (Real pints here, not your midget U.S. pints.) I'm not going to deny I'd been drinking, because I had. You can judge for yourself how much difference it made.

So the TV's on. The sound is going (It mocks us with its ... houseness!), I'm reading war-porn from Baen, the mynah birds are squawking in the papaya tree outside the back door, and although I can see clouds building up over the roof of the house next door, all is generally good with the world. I have a distinct 8.4-units-of-alcohol-happy-buzz thing going on.

Except when I get up to go to the bathroom, Harry isn't on the couch.

I look on the verandah. No Harry. I step out onto the verandah and look in the front yard. No Harry. Feeling a little nervous now, I walk round the left side of the house, round the back yard with the washing machine and the sink, continue round the house and back to the front yard.

No Harry.

I go to the gate—which someone has slid open. Not very much, but wide enough for a small boy to slip through.

Now I look back on it, I'm almost certain I shut that gate. Normally, I slide it shut every time, because if I don't the soi dogs get in and mangle my lawn. And besides, keeping the gate shut means Harry stays in the garden.

Maybe he opened it. Maybe I left it open.

Stories like this need a sin, don't they? It's the moralizing part in the urban legend. Don't sleep with your boyfriend. Don't speak to strangers. Don't steal. So maybe leaving the gate open was my sin—or Harry's sin.

Or maybe it was opened by ... someone else.

I go out on the soi, look left and right. The soi dogs are sleeping at the far end of the soi. A couple of cars are parked: my neighbor's dark blue Kia, and the lawyer's silver Corolla. Clouds are dark to the west, above the sleeping soi dogs. Thunder rumbles.

I can't see Harry.

You can probably imagine my state right at that moment. If you

have kids, I know that you know exactly what I was feeling. All parents have horribly vivid nightmares about nasty things happening to their kids.

I ran to the end of the soi and looked down the large road that runs through my moobahn. I couldn't see Harry. I ran to the entrance to the moobahn, ignoring the dogs barking at me over fences, and the looks I got from my neighbors. When I reached the security guard on duty, I asked him if he'd seen a little boy going out of the moobahn. He said no, and for a moment I relaxed, thinking Harry had to be somewhere in the moobahn and all I had to do was find him.

And then, as I looked along the entrance road—around two hundred yards long, leading to the main road beyond—I saw a black minivan waiting to turn left: indicator flashing, sunlight gleaming off the solar film in the back windows, thin puffs of blue exhaust as the engine burbled.

I'll be honest with you: I can't be sure quite what happened next. Strong emotion has a way of warping memory around it. I know I ran along the entrance road toward the van—not shouting, just running.

The van turned off onto the main road before I got within a hundred yards of it.

I didn't stop, of course. The next clear memory I have is reaching the end of the road and looking left, with that kind of hollow feeling you get when adrenaline has drowned everything else in your head.

The van was pulled over to the side of the road about fifty yards away, engine idling. It had stopped next to a huge clump of bamboo by the edge of the rice paddy. The bamboo rustled as the wind shook it.

Harry was standing behind the van, holding a half-drunk bottle of milk and bawling.

I ran to the van, still incapable of coherent thought, snatched Harry up and hugged him hard enough so that he yelled and hit me with his bottle of milk on the side of my head.

Then I thought about who was in the van and I turned round, clutching Harry hard. The sun was bright, and I couldn't see anything of the inside of the van except a slice of the floor near the door—even though both the mid-section door and the passenger door were open.

I took a half-step toward the van. I know it doesn't make any sense, but that's what I did. And you know, I wasn't thinking about crazed Chinese organleggers, or cannibal luk-chin makers, or wild-eyed Khmer Rouge straight out of the jungle.

No, what I was thinking about was the fact that the handle of the sliding door in the middle of the van was bent round like half a pretzel, and that in front of the door was a large footprint, squished into the soft mud in the side of the road. I looked hard at that footprint. Believe me.

And then three things happened at the same time. The first was that I heard a snap from behind me, the sound of a length of bamboo cracking. One of those thick stems of bamboo. The second was that Harry said, "Monkey! Look, Daddy! Monkey! Monkey!" The third was that I saw a spot of bright red liquid just inside the van, glistening crimson against the steel floor where the sun caught it.

I didn't turn round. I was looking at the footprint, and thinking about big yellow teeth, and how I'd told Harry that monkeys didn't like to be stared at.

"Monkey!" Harry repeated. He bounced against me. "Monkey! Monkey! Monkey! Daddy, look!" Then he laughed in delight and hit me on the side of my head.

The bamboo rustled. There was a sound like something dragging against the ground.

"Monkey, bye, bye!" Harry said. "Daddy, bye, bye, monkey!"

I waited, then turned round. One of the bamboo stems on the side of the road was broken, snapped in half and crushed—what you'd expect if something heavy had pressed on it. There was a pair of footprints in the mud nearby. Two more footprints led down the bank of the rice paddy, heading toward the bright green rice and muddy water. Between the footprints were lines in the mud, like you'd get if you dragged something behind you. On the far side of the paddy, the thick brush waved. The top of a wild banana tree quivered. It might have been something pushing through the brush. (Something big.) But then again, it might have just been the wind from the approaching storm.

Then it started raining.

The police never identified the van, or traced its owner. The plates came from a Toyota Camry that had been stolen a month before, and the serial number on the engine block apparently belonged to a van scrapped six months before. The blood traces didn't lead anywhere either. The lead cop told me afterward the spots in the back came from at least six different people. The gaffer tape could have been bought anywhere, and the same went for the child-size Ultraman t-shirt.

They kept asking me about the door handle. But after they'd checked my prints against the ones they found, I stopped getting suspicious looks. I didn't touch the handle—but someone did. And whoever it was, they gripped it so hard they bent the metal like it was hot plastic.

I didn't tell the police about the footprints, and as they didn't ask me anything about them, I assume the rain must have washed them away. I think I'm glad about that.

You see, those footprints weren't shoeprints, or bootprints. They were footprints, and they looked almost exactly like the footprints of a very large, barefoot man with long toes.

Almost ... but not quite.

Some years ago, I read a story in the *Bangkok Post*. It's dropped off their archive pages now, but if you contacted them directly, they could probably send you a copy. (I told you this was a true story.)

I can't remember the exact wording, but the story itself and the accompanying photo are still very clear in my mind. The photo showed a small crocodile in a pen at the Samut Prakarn Crocodile Farm and Zoo. The croc was basking in the sun, managing the difficult task of looking both lazy and vicious, and a local government official was standing close behind it—but not too close. The official was beaming, and pointing to the croc's head with a length of rattan.

They'd caught the croc in Ayutthaya—a city about thirty klicks north of Bangkok. It must have escaped from one of the crocodile farms around there, and rather than head for the Chao Phraya, it decided to swim into a storm drain under a large market in the center of the tourist area of Ayutthaya. And there it lived for several years, eating rats, monitor lizards, snakes, and all the garbage washed into the drain from the market. A word about Thai storm drains here: they're square concrete ditches about two/three feet on an edge, and the top is covered with concrete slabs. At my university, the monitor lizards use them for running around the campus. And this croc had been using one to crawl around under the marketplace. For years.

It's not a sewer. Not quite. But it's close as damnit.

Urban myth: A modern story of obscure origin and with little or no supporting evidence ...

Only sometimes, you know, they're actually true.

So here we are at the end. Kind of inconclusive, you may be thinking. And that's understandable, but this is a true story, and like Margaret Atwood says in *Happy Endings*, the only authentic conclusion to true stories is John and Mary die.

But though Harry could have died (or worse, just vanished forever), he didn't (and hasn't). As I sit here in the bedroom typing, the door to the room open behind me, the sound of him fighting with his brothers drifts up the stairs, and that's conclusion enough for me.

One last word: when or if you have children, and you're playing a game with them in which an invisible creature (be it monkey, doolally, or something entirely less ordinary) is an essential component, just make sure the invisible creature is one that has teeth.

Preferably large teeth. ❧

Achilles, Sulking in

Sing, O muse, of the mighty Achilles, brooding alone in the wine-dark parking lot.

Consider Achilles and his cherry ride, a 1947 Buick Roadmaster Fastback, chopped and channeled, lowered three inches, enough chrome to garnish Olympia itself, windows smoked dark as a Spartan's heart. The ride shines under fourteen coats of gold paint, hand-rubbed, custom plates reading "TIME." Don't ask how much pull it took to get that from the DMV. Achilles has the finest wheels in the Achaeans.

He's parked on the blacktop behind Illium High, pissed. Agamemnon Atreus, street general for the Achaeans, two-timed off with Achilles' girlfriend Brisei. Aggie's squeeze Chryseis was grounded by her old man, and Aggie couldn't rumble the Trojans without a doll in Capri pants and ice-pink lipstick riding shotgun in his baby blue 1951 Lincoln Continental with the "CLEOS" plates.

Aggie wants the Buick, too, but even though he's the leader of the pack, big as he is he's not quite tough enough to take skinny little Achilles down mano a mano. Which would be the only way to get the keys. Brisei was a different story, turned with some fast talking and couple of lids of primo California Red.

His Buick

BY JAY LAKE ILLUSTRATION BY MARK HARMON

Girls is girls, but cars is cars.

Now Aggie's revving the Lincoln up, fixing to play chicken with Hector, chief enforcer for the Trojans. Hector's got a German ride, customized by Schliemann's down in Culver City, not even a Mercedes for Apollo's sake, but a weird make called a Prinz with a banker's paint job—maroon and blacked-out trim. This ain't the main event, not by a long shot, but the Achaeans and the Trojans like to start off their rumbles with a lot of noise and some flash. Let the leadership show some investment, take a few scrapes. Then the street greasers will shout and shove, somebody will lose a few teeth, some more high-rev dragging and chicken racing, and on a really good night, crunch-bang-boom.

What every race fan lives for, Saturday nights behind Ilium High.

Aggie's got his rod smoking on the line, Brisei leaning back and looking cool with a Camel in her pale lips and a tank top falling strapless off one bare shoulder. Hector's two hundred yards away, at the ragged edge of the blacktop past the

rusty hoops of the rec basketball shooters, German engine almost whining. The Trojan doesn't believe in burning rubber—he likes to show some class, some control.

Hermes, back from college and now above partisanship in these small-town Olympian frays, drops the flag and the boys are off. Aggie lays some smoking rubber, while Hector smooths off the line like a goose on Maalox. Achilles in his Buick pretends not to be watching, but somehow no one's obstructing his view of the short track, no one wanders too close to the Roadmaster.

There's a shudder of metal and squeal of brakes as Aggie and Hector miss by a hair, just close enough for each to claim the other one veered off first. A chrome mirror spins in the air, trailing shattered glass like a comet's tail, prize off one of the king cars, though in the flash of the moment, no one's sure which.

After a few moments of disorganization, the rumble starts in earnest, motorcycle chains and tire irons flying. Achilles lights up a Gauloise—he's that kind of guy—leans back against his windowframe, and blows viscous smoke rings around the interior of his car.

"Hey, buddy." Someone raps on the Buick's fender, nearly a capital offense.

Achilles leaps up, bumps the wheel hard enough to sound the horn, and curses in the language of his fathers, something about goats and olives.

"Easy, easy." It's Patroclus, a kid who'd watched Achilles's back since fifth grade for no better reason than Pat liked to see the little guys win. Achilles was the toughest son of a bitch in Olympia, but he was small. Bantam weight, fighting far above his class, and winning every time.

Sometimes he could get tired of honor.

"Pat," says Achilles. "Don't be sneaking up on people like that."

Pat leans in the window, no wine or dope fogging his breath. "Look, there's going to be another round of runs later. Hector's stepping in, gonna flatten some of our boys. Aggie really wants you in. Those Trojans are scared spitless of the Roadmaster."

"Screw Aggie," Achilles says with his usual eloquence.

"I know, I know. So I got this plan. Let me drive the Buick, put some water in their leadfeet, those boys'll fold like yesterday's paper."

Achilles takes a long drag on his current Gauloise. He hates the damned things, actually, but the imported French cigarettes annoy almost everyone else with their stench and their expense. Keeps people jumping. "I don't know, Pat. Nobody drives the Buick."

"Exactly," says Patroclus. "That's why they'll think it's you."

"What do I get out of it?"

Pat grins like he just discovered sex. "You get to put one up on Hector and Agamemnon at the same damned time."

"Até." Despite himself, Achilles begins to chuckle. "That just might be worth it."

About an hour later, the Buick rolls up to the line. Achaeans and Trojans, they're doing a head-on, six on six. At the sight of Achilles's Roadmaster, two Trojans drop it into reverse and chicken out of the race. There's consternation in the crowd, on both sides actually, Agamemnon giving the Buick a dirty look from his place in the stands.

But Hector's still down there in the Prinz, a car half the weight of the Buick, and he's ready to rumble. Somehow the six-on-six turns into a one-on-one, and no one cares. This is the main event, the big rumble. Big man Trojan against big man Achaean.

Achilles is in the stands, too, wearing a grease monkey coverall from Western Auto and a fedora pulled low. No one looks at a little guy, not in this crowd. He's getting worried, actually, about the Buick and even about Patroclus. This was supposed to be a stunt, but it's turning into a grudge match.

Then it's too late, Hermes drops the flag, the dolls are screaming, Pat lays a twenty-yard scratch as the Prinz flies like a bullet from a gun and they meet a hundred yards from their starting places, dead center in the middle, only at the last moment Pat loses his nerve and heaves the Buick over, which you can't never do that with a car heavy as the Roadmaster, and the Prinz shoots by, home free, straight as an arrow, while the Buick rolls and slides into the bricks on the back side of Illium High's dining hall, and there's Hector standing on the doorframe of the Buick and he's trying to help Patroclus out, or maybe he's pushing Pat back in as the car catches fire and sweet Apollo she's going to blow!

Hector barely makes it away from the explosion. Pat is so much pavement paste. Dishonored, Achilles is far gone into rage, where the whole world goes as red as his hair and every moment in time is a world wasted, leaping down from the stands, literally jumping onto guys' shoulders to get past them, a crescent wrench swinging in his hand to clear the way.

But there's Hephaestus, another customizer from Culver City, standing in the fist-fighting crowd as unconcerned as a summer day in Crete. He's leaning on a hot rod so black it's almost a metal shadow, custom body work down to the frame and maybe custom all the way to the pavement, looking like the bastard child of a Ferrari and a Cadillac hearse. Achilles charges forward with murder in his eye, on his lips, and in his hands, and Hephaestus tosses him the keys.

THERE'S ONE OF THOSE MOMENTS, WHEN THE GODS DECREE THAT TIME'S ARROW SHALL STAND FORFEIT AND ENTIRE LIVES ARE GATHERED LIKE AN UPHOLSTERY STITCH.

There's one of those moments, when the gods decree that time's arrow shall stand forfeit and entire lives are gathered like an upholstery stitch. The keys glitter in the air, a star snatched from heaven and sent to Achilles's open hand even as his crescent wrench spins toward the pavement.

This is it, his destiny, time to show Hector and Agamemnon both who's the best man in this one-horse town on the edge of the sea, time to be a real fighter, define his own damned weight class, by Apollo. The keys hit Achilles's hand like a stage weight, their heft staggering him in place. Hephaestus touches something secret and a door eases up on the black car, opening gull-wing style to a paradise of black leather and pale green lights.

It's like looking into Hades.

Hades looks back.

Achilles stands beneath the upswung door, keys straining forward, hearing the distant sirens of the Olympia Fire Brigade. Hephaestus's black car reeks of leather and oil and, somehow, blood. He glances up to see Brisei staring at him, shaking her head, crying. Even in the shadows of the evening he can see that. Achilles thinks that's Aggie's handprint on her face too, where the Atreian bastard slapped her.

Patroclus's pyre lights the night, the Roadmaster taking him to Hades in style, and probably Illium High's dining hall with it. Glimpsed through the struggling crowd, a tired Hector, singed, bloodied, discouraged, trudges back toward his abandoned Prinz.

This is Achilles's moment. This is what he sulked all afternoon at the back of the parking lot for. His honor. His destiny, to be a hero.

Was it ever worth the lives?

The smell of Hades hard in his nostrils, Achilles drops the keys, kicks them under Hephaestus's sin-black hot rod, and walks out to the street. His heel burns like fire. Someone has the nerve to toot a horn at him, but it's just Odysseus, that odd stoner, in a chartreuse VW microbus with curtained windows and enough dope lit up inside to power a small town. A man who always takes the long way home.

Odd, ever the wily trickster, waves Achilles over. The greatest fighter of the Achaeans climbs in shotgun without a word, accepts a joint the size of his thumb, and motors off in a cloud of burnt oil and sweet hemp to a different destiny.

Behind them, unnoticed, Hector stands weeping at the curb. ❧

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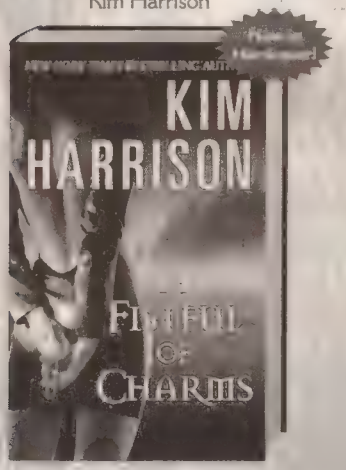

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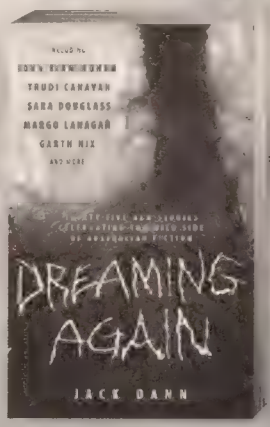

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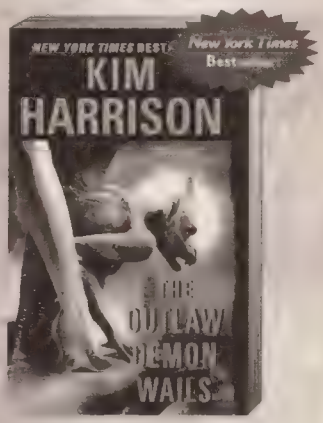

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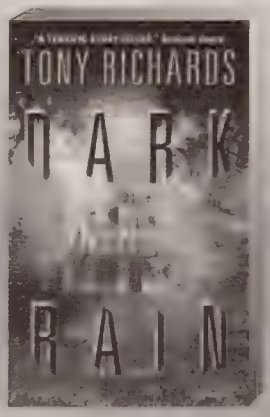

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THE Milagroso Trail

When you're on a quest, it helps to know what you're looking for, or how will you know when you've found it?

BY CLINTON LAWRENCE
ILLUSTRATION BY KENNETH CALLICUTT

In retrospect, I suppose we were a bit like Coronado searching for Cibola. Except, of course, that our journey only lasted a few days instead of years, we weren't looking for gold, we didn't kill anyone along the way, and I think we each had very different expectations about what we would find.

Darlene was the first to hear about Milagroso. It is probably an exaggeration to refer to it as a legend, as even the most lucid tales about it lack a glimmer of clarity. Darlene's version, courtesy of a friend of a friend of a friend who claimed to know someone who had actually been there, didn't amount to much more than rumors of a strange village hidden deep on national forest land northeast of Covelo. There was the hint of miraculous events happening there, but when pressed, Darlene couldn't provide details. I don't know if Darlene really believed we would find anything when she suggested the backpacking trip. Her plan had us spending Christmas in the village, and it could have easily been a ploy to get us out into the cold, wet elements. I had my suspicions. We had grown up neighbors and close friends, and the one thing she liked to do best as a child was play soccer in a downpour. She was fortunate to have tolerant parents. In her mid-twenties, she still had not outgrown her love of miserable weather.

Neither Sheila nor I wanted to spend Christmas with family this year. We had spent Thanksgiving with them (Sheila in Kansas City, me at my parents' winter home in Phoenix). Sheila hated airports all the time, and one trip a year during the holidays was enough. For me, there was that spat at the end of the weekend that we were all still refusing to apologize for. And who really wants another brown Arizona Christmas?

Sheila and I discussed Darlene's proposal vigorously for about a week. In the end, Darlene convinced us all by producing a map when we met for dinner in mid-December. It wasn't the sort of map that should have installed much confidence in any of us—nothing more than a U.S. Forest Service topographical map with some trails drawn in by hand, and a dot showing Milagroso's alleged location. I'm still surprised that I was the first to say, "Let's do it." Both Sheila and Darlene's boyfriend, Greg, quickly agreed.

It had been one of those Northern California Decembers without much rain, and the gravel Forest Service roads were pretty dry, at least where the redwoods didn't keep them in near-eternal shade. Darlene drove her Jeep Cherokee as close as we could get to the apparent location of Milagroso. We found a little pull-out sheltered by underbrush, and parked. It was late afternoon, but still a pleasant sunny day in the low fifties, and we all got out of the car to look around. There was a light breeze, but it wasn't enough to make me feel uncomfortable. The only sounds were birds chirping away in the trees, although we did see some squirrels scurrying around. The fresh smell of dirt and evergreens was quite refreshing after spending four hours in the stale air inside the Cherokee. We decided it was too late to get very far hiking, so Darlene found a flat spot nearby to pitch a tent. We obviously were not anywhere near an official campground, nor had we paid any camping fees, but I don't think any of us expected the rangers to be patrolling much this time of year.

Sheila and I looked around for a few minutes, too, until I said, "Why don't we just sleep in the Cherokee tonight? There's plenty of room for two of us, and it will probably be warmer."

"Feeling a bit lazy?" Sheila asked.

"No," I said, though it was exactly what I was feeling. "It's just that we'll be sleeping in the tent for several days. Why not just be a little more comfortable tonight?"

"You're hopeless sometimes." She could always see right to the heart of my motivations. "OK, fine, we can sleep in the car if you want."

Greg chuckled. "Wimps. It's not even raining."

"One last night of relative comfort. That's all I want," I said.

"The Cherokee isn't much more comfortable than a tent," Darlene said. "Sheila's right. If you're not going to be busy putting up your tent, why don't you go find us some wood for a campfire?"

It was a good idea, so Sheila and I set off on a search, which wasn't too difficult. There were fallen trees and branches everywhere. We built a ring from some rocks on a bare spot of dirt, and soon had a fire going. It was getting dark, and there were a few clouds passing overhead by the time we were ready to eat our first meal of nuts and dehydrated soup. Everyone was quiet. At the time, it seemed to me that the silence was a bizarre form of reverence, or possibly some apprehension, now that our quest was beginning. It would probably be closer to the truth to say that after spending all that time in the car, no one had much left to say.

Except Darlene, of course, who said as we watched some thin clouds roll in and obscure the stars, "I hope it rains tonight."

Not even Greg bothered to answer her.

It was completely overcast in the morning, and though the clouds didn't seem to indicate an imminent threat, Darlene seemed very cheerful. She finished her breakfast first, and hummed an unrecognizable tune as she rolled up the tent and tied it to Greg's pack. She finished while the rest of us were still eating instant oatmeal.

"Hurry up, let's get moving," she said.

"Give us a chance to warm up first," I said.

It wasn't really that cold; the clouds kept the temperature from dropping below freezing. Still, I think I spoke for both Sheila and Greg, though he did stir himself from the campfire and packed away the rest of his gear. Sheila and I didn't move quite as quickly, but we did eat a little faster, and it wasn't long before we were wearing our backpacks and had hiked a few hundred feet back down the road. We huddled around Darlene and the map.

"You're sure this is supposed to be the trailhead?" I asked.

"There's nothing else around that looks like a trail," Darlene said.

"It looks like a deer trail to me. It looks like a really good way to get lost."

"I'm sure we'll be OK," Greg said. "Seems to be the right spot on the map."

"I'm sure this is right," Darlene said.

"I'm not liking this," I said.

"Fine. You can stay here and wait for us. Here are my keys." Darlene held them out to me.

"Come on, let's go, Brian," Sheila said to me. "I didn't come all the way up here for you spoil the trip."

If there was one thing I was pretty sure of, it was that no deer trail would lead to a secret village, but I said, "Keep the keys. I'll come."

The trail did its share of meandering, but it did seem to lead us northwest, as the map indicated it should. The forest floor was covered in ferns where there wasn't underbrush, and where there wasn't other vegetation, there were millions of spiderwebs stretched across the carpet of redwood needles. It was a very peaceful walk, interrupted intermittently by Darlene's bad jokes.

"OK, here's a Christmas joke," she said in the afternoon. "There was this spy who got it into his head that Santa Clause must have some incredible surveillance technology to know who was good and bad, and that it would be really useful to his government. So he took a trip to the North Pole, and broke into Santa's office in the middle

"I like a few guests
But hiding

of the night when he was sure no one would be working. But all he saw was a big book on the desk. He snooped, and saw it was nothing more than a big list of names with color codes behind them. There was no sign of the kind of advanced technology he was interested in.

"It was about then that a group of elf guards burst into the office, leaped on him, and tied him up before he could react.

"When they pulled him to his feet, he said, 'I want to see your leader.'

"The lead guard said, 'Oh, you'll see him, all right.'

"'So how did you know I was here?'

"'Oh, you spies are all such idiots. He's a telepath!'"

We laughed anyway, loud enough to scare off a nearby buck we hadn't noticed before.

"Too bad it's not hunting season," Greg said.

"You hunt?" Sheila asked.

"No, not really."

"I wouldn't want to be carrying around a dead deer for several days, anyway," I said.

"Can't you say anything without complaining?" Sheila said. "You're ruining the trip for everyone."

"Let him alone," Darlene said. "Without hardship and complaints, it's not a real adventure."

"I thought we were looking for magic," I said.

"We're looking for both."

The silence of the previous evening returned for a while, until the wind started picking up and the clouds got darker.

"I think we should look for a place to stay tonight," I said.

For once, everyone agreed with me, even Darlene. The trail was leading us down into a ravine, where we suspected a small creek flowed, and it didn't seem like a good place to be if the rains started. We found a flat spot that looked both safe and somewhat sheltered

by underbrush, and Sheila and Greg built a fire while Darlene and I pitched the tents. We had our fire started, and were just about to boil water for our dinner when Sheila interrupted us in a low voice.

"Who's that?"

Approaching from up the trail on was a middle-aged man on a chestnut horse, wearing a hat like a ranger's. We were a little off the trail, and thought we might be hidden well enough, but it quickly became apparent that he had seen the smoke from our fire.

"Think we're busted?" Greg said.

"I don't know," I said. "If that's who he is, I'm surprised to see them riding horses out here on a day like this."

We all stood up to greet him.

"Unless I'm wrong, there will be thunderstorms tonight," he said. "This is not a good place to be. You had best follow me. You'll be a lot safer at my home."

Someone had to ask, and the others left it to me. "Are you a ranger?"

"Oh, no." He had a strange, high-pitched chuckle. "I just live out here." He scratched the back of his neck. "It's about an hour's walk from here. Pack up, and maybe we can make it while there's still a little light. My name's Foster."

We each introduced ourselves, and then put out the campfire and broke down the camp as quickly as we could. It took about ten minutes. Foster just watched us from his horse. He didn't seem to want to talk as long as we were on the trail, and we were reduced to whispers.

"Milagroso?"

"Yes, I think that's the name."

"Do you know where it is?"

"I'm afraid I'm not much help. I've only heard about it from the searchers."

Foster handed the bottles of beer around. The beer was a rich, full amber, malty, but with a lot of hops as well.

"Much better than the Australian," Greg said.

We all sat around the table, and Darlene got out the map.

"It looks mostly right to me," Foster said. "At least the areas I know about. There's a lot of trails missing, though."

"What about the location of Milagroso?" Sheila asked.

"I've never been there. I really just can't say. Marvin might know, though. He's traveled that area of the forest more than I have. He really knows it a lot better."

"There's more of you living up here?" I said.

Foster nodded. "Maybe a dozen or so of us scattered about."

"Where can we find him?" Darlene asked.

Foster took a pencil. "You're right here now. There's a trail that runs along here." He drew a line on the map that meandered to the north. "Follow it to here, where it forks. Go left, toward the west. It's about a day's hike, but it will take you right to Marvin's house."

I don't know why, but it wasn't until that moment that I noticed a small-framed black-and-white photograph of a woman on a shelf near the door.

"Who's that?" I asked.

at a time, but I can't handle too many. the house doesn't help if there's a fire."

"Do you think this is really a good idea?" I asked Darlene.

"It's a great idea. Who knows, maybe he lives in Milagroso. I interpret this as a great bit of luck. At the very least, he'll probably be able to tell us something."

"If Milagroso even exists."

"Yes, if it exists. Foster is pretty good evidence that someone lives out here."

"Perhaps," I said. I was trying to maintain my skepticism, but she had a point.

Foster led us over more deer trails, deeper into the forest, until we reached a little log cabin in a clearing, with a small log barn attached. It was clear to us all that there was no village here. He put the horse in the barn, fed it some grain, and then led us into the cabin and lit an oil lamp. There was a little more to it than I imagined. The main room served as both living room and kitchen, but there were also a couple more rooms to the back of the cabin. Bedrooms, Foster told us. One of them was his, the other we could use. At the center of the cabin was a little iron woodstove that served both to heat the house and cook. Foster shoved a couple of logs into the stove, and the surviving embers ignited them.

"I'm afraid I can't offer you any food, but you brought your own, right?" Foster said. "When you live up here, you have to conserve what you have. But I think I could spare a bottle of beer for each of you, if you like. I brewed it myself."

"You're very kind," Sheila said.

"Yes, thank you," Darlene said. "I guess I'm just now realizing I could have led everyone into disaster tonight."

"You were safe enough," Foster said. "I had been following you for quite a while. It's the time of the year to worry about such things."

"You have other visitors come this way?" Darlene asked.

"Not this year. But most years, one or two small groups like yours. They're always looking for some secret place."

"That's my wife, Elaine. She's away visiting friends."

After we had crawled into our sleeping bags, I whispered to Sheila, "Does it seem odd to you that his wife isn't here?"

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know, it just seems a little creepy to me. Who could she be visiting?"

"Well, he did say there are others who live up here. One of them, maybe?"

"Maybe. Or maybe something happened to her. Why do you think anyone would choose such an isolated life, unless they were hiding?"

"It is a little strange," Darlene agreed. Her bag was on the other side of me, and she obviously had overheard my concerns.

"I just don't completely trust him," I said.

"Neither do I," Darlene said. "But he has been helpful to us so far. As much as I like rain, I'm not that fond of being outside when there's lightning around."

"So what do you want to do?" Greg chimed in.

"We don't have much choice but to stay here tonight," Sheila said.

In the end, we agreed to take two-hour sentry shifts. Because I brought up the issue, they voted for me to take the undesirable three-to-five slot.

The thunderstorm had passed during the night. The air was still cold and misty, but we were all ready to press on in the morning, relieved that our concerns about Foster so far seemed unfounded, but still anxious to put his cabin well behind us. We bundled up in our warmest clothes, with raincoats as the outer layer, and set off after thanking Foster for his hospitality. It was a much more cheerful hike once Foster's place was out of sight. Even Darlene's jokes seemed funnier.

Around noon, we stopped for a rest and quick bite to eat, and Sheila said to me, "You're a lot more pleasant to be around today."

I looked at her and shrugged.

"You were a real pain in the ass yesterday. I was wishing we hadn't come."

I guess I had been, but I just said, "It looks like we're getting somewhere today."

"I'm glad you're excited about it again, even if you don't believe we'll find anything."

"It's that obvious?"

"For what's it's worth, none of the rest of us have any idea what to believe."

The day passed quickly, without any more significant rain, and by mid-afternoon, we had put away the raincoats. The sky had mostly cleared, but a few scattered dark clouds floated overhead. Darlene started to get concerned that we had gone farther than we should have, so we stopped to rest on a fallen log and looked at the map. The trail had led us up and down several hills, and across a few small streams. Unfortunately, the map didn't show all of them, so we were a bit confused.

"We didn't take the wrong fork, did we?" Sheila asked.

"Foster said the left fork, toward the west," Greg said. "That's what we took."

I looked closely. "I think we're here. Which is still a hill away. Maybe another hour."

"That's getting pretty close to dark," Sheila said. "Perhaps we should start looking for campsites, just in case we're farther away than we think."

"Good idea," Darlene said.

"I don't think that will be necessary," said a strange voice from behind us. "You're much closer to your destination than you think."

A young, bearded man with long brown hair stepped out from behind a large redwood. "I'm Marvin. I've been expecting you. Foster told me you were coming this way."

"How did he do that?" Greg asked. "Cell phone or radio?"

Marvin laughed. "No, we don't have anything like that out here. Come this way."

Marvin's house was located a short distance off the trail. Like Foster's, it was another log cabin, but without the attached barn.

"I like this time of year," he said. "The summers can be worrisome, with the crowds tramping through the forest. That's why I keep the house well hidden. I like a few guests at a time, but I can't handle too many. But hiding the house doesn't help if there's a fire. Ursula has the best solution to that problem, I think."

"Who's Ursula?" Darlene asked.

"Oh, I think you'll be meeting her soon. Another day's hike. She's kind of a matriarch around here."

"And what's her solution?" I asked.

"She lives in a cave. It's actually quite a bit bigger than my house and Foster's."

The inside looked much like Foster's cabin as well.

"It might not seem like much to outsiders, but it's a comfortable place for me. I grew up here in the forest and wouldn't want to live anywhere else." Marvin lit a lamp. "I'm afraid I can't offer you a beer, but I've made my own herbal tea blend. You're very welcome to try some, and I'll try to answer your questions. First, though, I must tell you that I don't know much about Milagroso."

"Whatever you can tell us would be much appreciated."

"It's not much more than a name to me, and one I've mostly heard from those seeking it. I would like to see your map."

Darlene took it out.

"Hmm." Marvin said.

"What?" she asked.

"I can't say for sure that I've been in that exact location, but I've been near there, and I don't remember seeing anything but forest. Perhaps I missed it."

"Is it possible that it's somewhere else?"

"Well, yes, it's possible. Your map does not seem completely unreliable. I've seen other maps showing it in that location, so perhaps it's there."

"Haven't you looked for it yourself?" I asked.

"No," Marvin said. "I've never had a reason to, and I think that's what you'll find among most of us who live out here. Sometimes secrets should remain secrets, and I'm not inclined to pry. Not that I think there's anything wrong with you doing so. But I think Ursula is the one who can best answer your questions."

He folded up the map and handed it back to Darlene.

The rest of the evening, he entertained us with his guitar, and he was surprisingly good.

We found Ursula's home only because Marvin's directions were very clear and accurate, and because we could see a little smoke seemingly seeping from the ground above. The door wasn't exactly at the entrance, but hidden around a bend inside the cave's mouth.

I was the one who knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" The voice on the other side sounded annoyed at best.

We told her.

"Come in, then. I've been waiting all day for you."

Ursula's home was huge, with a distinct musty smell. Although she had logs as paneling on the walls, the rock and dirt behind still made it feel like being in a mine. We walked down a long hallway with five rooms on each side. The doors were open, and they contained beds. The corridor opened into a huge room, with a huge Christmas tree in the center, and a small woodstove in back right corner with a metal chimney rising to the ceiling. Unlike the sparse log cabins, the cave was well furnished and decorated, with two sofas, several chairs, a large table for dining, and lots of books on shelves.

"Please sit," she said. "I understand you are looking for a place called Milagroso."

"Yes," Darlene said.

"Let me tell you a story as I have heard it."

"Many, many years ago, a young woman came to the forest to hide from something or somebody, or just got lost. Or maybe she was not yet a woman, perhaps even still a little girl. She might have come from Santa Rosa or San Francisco or Sacramento, or somewhere else entirely. Some say she had no name, or that she chose to conceal it, or that it was Marian or Paula or possibly even Juanita. These were her secrets, and secrets were the most valuable things she had.

"When she would run by, the ferns would ask her, 'What are you doing alone in the forest?'

"The woman said, 'That's a secret, and I don't care to share it with you. But tell me, if you needed protection, what creature in the forest would you ask?'"

"The ferns said, 'You're being quite rude, and we're not sure we should tell you.'

"The woman pleaded with them, and finally they said, 'We would choose the redwoods, but that's not a creature, is it?'

"The woman shook her head.

"'That's the best suggestion I have. They have always taken good care of us. You could always ask.'

"So the woman approached the tallest redwood she could find, and said, 'Would you be willing to help me?'

"'Why would I help you? All you humans do is chop us down to build your shelters, and sometimes you even burn us. Get lost.'

"'I already am lost.'

"'Good,' the redwood said. 'Now, get out of my sight.'

"The woman fled, aimlessly but as quickly as she could run. She stopped by a stream only when she could run no more. And there, she fell asleep.

"When she awoke, a doe was drinking from the stream. She called to it.

"'What do you want?' the doe asked. 'I don't have much time, and I don't really like your kind any better than I like the bears, mountain lions, and wolves.'

"I have told you what I know. If Milagroso exists, you may find it. You may not. I know that a few say they have."

"'I'm lost and frightened, and I need help.'

"'I'm happy for you. Maybe you know what it feels like to be us.'

"And with that, the deer bounded away. The woman was confused and hurt by the rudeness of the forest. She had never done anything to harm the flora and fauna here. But she pressed on, only to get the same reaction from every animal she encountered. Even the wolf, who reminded her so much of the dog she had as a young child, had nothing but insults and accusations of massacres for her. She continued wandering, until finally she came upon a trapped bear.

"'What happened to you?' she asked.

"The bear pointed to its leg with its huge paw. 'If you could just free me, I will reward you.'

"'You won't hurt me, will you? I've been finding the forest to be a very unfriendly place.'

"'You should expect that. Nevertheless, I promise to keep you from harm if you free me.'

"'I can stay here, and live as long as I want? Or, if I choose to leave, you will show me the way out?'

"'Yes, all that. Please, just free me, and I'll show you the magic and the ways of forest life. Although, I don't think being my friend will make you any more popular here.'

"She freed him, and the bear kept his bargain. She built a little house from dead logs, and the bear taught her how to find food and was never far away. Eventually, some of her old friends found her, and she convinced them to stay, until there was a tiny collection of little cottages, seven altogether, and the bear kept watch over them all from his nearby cave.

"That is the legend of the founding of Milagroso."

"That's all?" Darlene asked.

"Yes," Ursula said.

"Nothing about miracles?" Sheila asked.

"Talking with ferns and redwoods and bears is not miraculous enough for you? The expectations never fail to amaze me."

"I'm not sure it helps us find Milagroso," I said.

"I have told you what I know. If Milagroso exists, you may find it. You may not. I know that a few say they have. I cannot verify whether they are right. And now, I think it is time for you to sleep. I do hope you will stay for tomorrow night's Christmas Eve party."

"We'd really like to be in Milagroso for Christmas," Darlene said.

"I believe you would still be able to make it, if your map is correct. It seems to be consistent with other maps I have seen. Now, off to bed with you. You may choose your rooms. I have much work to do."

About a dozen guests showed up for Ursula's party. Foster was there, and so was Elaine. She turned out to be a very pleasant person. Marvin provided the entertainment, playing his guitar and singing much of the evening. We met the others, too, and tried to glean more information, but no one could tell us more than Ursula. Everyone helped with cooking the meal, which consisted of roasted venison, potatoes, broccoli, and for dessert, blackberry pie.

"The blackberries are wild," Elaine told us. "There's a patch of them about a half mile from here."

For a time, the odors of the feast covered up the mustiness of Ursula's cave. And a bigger surprise awaited us. During the gift exchange, they gave us each a little gift, identical redwood carvings of a village with seven cottages.

"May it help guide you in your quest," Ursula said. "None of us can know if it's an accurate representation, of course, but it's the best we can do on short notice." We thanked them all.

At some point, I noticed a door that was never opened. No one seemed to be paying attention, so I decided to snoop, but found the door locked.

"I lost the key a long time ago," Ursula said.

"What's behind it?"

"Nothing of importance. It used to be a storage room, but I don't remember what I stored there."

A little while later, while Greg and Sheila were conversing with other guests, Darlene sat down next to me. "Will you marry me?" she asked.

I just laughed.

"Really, I'm serious."

"No," I said. "No. I'm in love with Sheila. What about Greg?"

"It's over. Haven't you noticed? We've hardly said a word to each other the whole trip."

Actually, I hadn't noticed that.

"I thought it might be a chance to reconnect, but it hasn't happened," she said.

"Aren't you being a little impulsive?"

"We've been close friends since childhood. How much more do I need to know about you?"

She had a point, but not one I was willing to accept yet.

We reached the spot where we expected to find Milagroso at around noon on Christmas Day, but other than a couple of deer trails intersecting, we found nothing but the forest. After investigating the immediate area for a while, we decided that it was a good place to camp that night. The next few days, we were a little subdued and disappointed as we hiked back to the Cherokee. Only Darlene cheered up, and then only because a light rain started falling during the last hour of our hike.

"This was really a great Christmas, wasn't it?" she said as we stuffed our packs into the car.

I don't remember anyone giving her an answer.

It's been quite a few years since that trip. As I'm finishing this, the twins are asleep, and Darlene is reading a book in the living room, oblivious to the fact that I've decided to write this account. To be honest, I don't really understand why I'm doing it. We have never tried to find Milagroso again. Over the years, however, I've become convinced that it does exist. I think I know exactly where and what it is. Somewhat ironic, since I was the most skeptical of us from the beginning. I won't say more than that.

And I have a confession to make. While most of this account is true, I have told you a few lies. I won't reveal all of them, but here are two: the name of the village isn't really Milagroso, and it isn't really near Covelo. Some secrets should remain.

If you're inclined to look for it yourself, good luck. This is all the help I'm willing to offer. ❧

BY GREGORY FROST
ILLUSTRATION BY KIRIKO MOTH

Late in the Day

MEMORY LOSS IS ONE OF THE FIRST SIGNS OF AGING, AND WITHOUT OUR MEMORIES, WHO ARE WE, REALLY?

1. WHERE AM I?

The first thing on the list. Where am I? He stared at it, at a crumpled, yellowed piece of paper. He wondered how it came to be in his hand. Had he written it? Yesterday or last week? It looked like maybe he'd written it years ago and slept with it in his fist ever since. He couldn't hold it up anymore and let his arm drop.

Now he was staring at a white ceiling and fluorescent lights. The graininess of the ceiling recalled a chandelier somewhere that he'd once seen. Maybe owned.

There was a rail on the right side of the bed. A wispy curtain separated his bed from the other one in the room, which was empty. He didn't know how he knew it was empty. Across the room a vinyl-covered chair crouched below a high-mounted TV.

On the other side, tubes ran from his bony arm to a bag hanging like clear plastic fruit from a pole, and slowly, steadily dripping. Dripping. Dripping. When next he blinked his tired eyes, he suspected he'd been staring at the IV for an hour.

"Hospital," he croaked, and it seemed right. He made the effort to lift his twisted hand and focus upon the list again. He wished he had his glasses.

2. I DID THIS YESTERDAY, TOO

The item induced a momentary déjà vu. It felt like the truth. He could almost sense a long progression of days opening in the same manner, receding into an even dimmer history. The list had advised him yesterday and the day before and the day before ... all the way back to when some simian ancestor had come down out of the trees and drawn with a stick in the dirt. Lists. Every morning he was newly formed, beginning each day fresh if ancient.

"Tenacity." Someone had said that about him, one of the nurses? Not sure. For an instant he flashed on golden eyes and a strangely lit, lavender face. "Tenacity"—he could hear her say it, but as quickly she was gone. Her identity had rotted away just as he was rotting away. He sighed, worn out by trying to think of everything. Like the unoccupied bed, his memories lay just behind a screen he seemed powerless to open. "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain," he recited, voice a croak. Now, where was that from? No, it was gone. Every damned thing was going if not gone.

God, he wanted to get out of here, or this would all begin again, and he wouldn't know more than he did now, or maybe he'd know something else, but it wouldn't help either. Pieces. Just pieces.

He glanced up. The curtain around the other bed troubled him. What if the bed wasn't empty after all? He stared as if he could make himself see through it, and quite suddenly it fluttered, twitched, and drew back. The metal rings sang along the metal rod until the bed was revealed, empty as he'd believed, but ... had he made the curtain open?

Trembling, he looked down at the list.

3. RAISE THE BED

He patted around, touching a couple of objects. One had buttons on it. He pressed on them until the bed moved, raising his upper torso slowly, steadily, like the drip of the IV, and soon he could see his lap, and his fist, and the other thing lying beside him, its long handle pointing toward his leg. He knew what it was but the word, the goddam word, eluded him. He strained for it, then saw the next item on the list.

4. CHECK THE MIRROR

Mirror. So common a word, a thing. He picked it up clumsily, at first unable to train it on himself. His left hand didn't work so well. Had he had a stroke? How long ago?

He pushed the mirror over to where his right hand could grab it, then brought it closer; and there he was—familiar and unfamiliar both. The face wrinkled, spotted with dry flaking patches and brown liverish discolorations. Eyes rheumy, fogged like from yellowish cataracts. His dry lips were chapped and he licked them. Underneath the cracks they looked bluish or green, like an earlier coat of paint showing where the top coat was peeling away. How long ... The thought melted away. Why did he need to look at himself?

From down the hall he heard voices. They conjured half-remembered faces: two nurses, one fat and with a complexion as reddish as a rash; the other dark and small. They were more familiar to him than his own face. He could hear them as clearly as if they were in the room with him. Then he heard the woman in the next room call for "Bobby!" He listened and almost forgot to breathe. "Bobby, please. Please!" Her name was Alice. He'd written it down at the bottom of the list in a different colored ink. There it was. Alice. And her husband was dead, and he had no idea how he knew that, either—maybe the nurses talking; but it must have been important at some point. He'd put her name on the paper, hadn't he? She was calling for her husband, Bobby. She wanted him to smother her with a pillow. It was the only thing she ever asked for—for Bobby to come and kill her.

If he'd had a name to call, he'd have asked for the same. She couldn't stand what was left for her, of her. Same as him. He understood. Hell, yes, she wanted to die.

His hand holding the mirror dropped onto the covers. Had he gone through exactly this yesterday? Heard Alice. Written her name. Where was the pen? Day before? Week? He squeezed his eyes shut, mute with rage. His life was being drawn out of him like blood. Pretty soon the walls and the ceiling would have more of him than this ... this weak and withered carapace did. Pretty soon there would be nothing but the list. Alice. Her name was Alice. On the list. He'd written it at the bottom. He picked it up.

5. TRY TO CALL AGAIN

Now, what was that supposed to mean? Call who? Family? Did he have family? Had they come to visit? Could have, couldn't they? And would he remember them when he didn't even remember what was for dinner last night? Maybe there had been ice cream—had there been ice cream? What flavor? He didn't know. If he could have estab-

He stared at her a long time. She was wearing something like brown sackcloth, and she had small wings on her back, but her eyes, her face ... were the gold and lavender he'd seen ... where? Where had he seen them? He pretended not to panic.

lished something that simple, it would have provided a measure of how much he was losing, how much was left to lose. A yardstick. He feared he was running on empty, on fumes, on nothing more than the inability to realize he was dead.

Awhile he drifted, like a seed pod spinning down and down through a forest.

"Bobby, please," called Alice again, and he realized he'd floated off. Try to call, said the list. Well, she always did. And how did he hear her so damned well anyway? It was like she was in the curtained bed beside him, not on the far side of the wall. Try to call again? Had he tried calling someone before? And what was the next item supposed to mean?

6. WAIT FOR THEIR ANSWER

She moaned again. "Alice," he tried to shout out to her, but all that emerged was a rasp. He cleared his throat but couldn't make himself any louder. He shut his itchy eyes and shouted her name in his head as loud as he could think it, heard her gasp and fall silent, heard everything fall silent.

He must have blown a gasket with that because when he opened his eyes next it was late afternoon and the small brown nurse, Estrella, was taking his pulse. She seemed surprised when he looked at her. What had he been doing? He had to remember. He licked his lips. "Did I call my family?" he asked.

She continued with her bug-eyed stare, finally replied, "I thought you were asleep, Mr. Marsh. You near scared me half to death."

"Only half, huh?" He smiled with the side of his mouth that still worked. "Time was, I'd have scared the other half, too," he told her, having no idea what he meant.

Estrella shook her head as if at a naughty child. "I bet you were a skirt chaser, weren't you, Mr. Marsh?" She patted his wrist, then walked out of the room before he realized she hadn't answered his question. He would have to ask again. Tomorrow or sometime. Or maybe he'd asked her that every day now for a year and she knew he wouldn't remember anyway. Wait for their answer. Whose answer? For how long?

At least now he had a name. He wished he had a pen so he could write it down. Why had he written Alice's name and not his own?

Mr. Marsh.

He looked into the mirror again, at the thin veins, at parchment skin and eroded features, broken capillaries in his nose and cheeks. Mr. Marsh's face, and Mr. Marsh's hand, which was all gnarled, rheumatoid knuckles big as walnuts, the fingers pushed out of place because of them. He thought how it was getting harder to hold onto things, and then broke into a laugh as the full meaning of that struck home.

When he lowered the mirror, he found a small red-haired girl standing at his bedside and looking at him askance. The door was closed. When had she come in? He guessed he must have drifted again.

He stared at her a long time. She was wearing something like brown sackcloth, and she had small wings on her back, but her eyes, her face ... were the gold and lavender he'd seen ... where? Where had he seen them? He pretended not to panic.

"Your mommy and daddy around here?" he asked. "Did you come from a play? What are you supposed to be, kid, the littlest angel?" The girl leaned forward and sniffled. He felt drool slide from the corner of his mouth but before he could respond, the girl reached up and wiped it away with her tiny mauve fingers and then idly dried them on the sheets, which left an incongruously yellowish stain, almost a phosphorescence. Her nails were very long for a child's. He licked his lips again and said, "I don't have anyone ..."

"You outlived them all," she replied. "You're a hundred and two. In their years."

"Hundred and two," he repeated. He wanted to write it on the list. He needed a damn pen. He knew he would forget. The next two items caught his attention:

7. BATH

8. DENY SEEING ANYTHING

Alice moaned next door. The noise made his random thoughts congeal again. He watched the girl tilt her head as if listening and her eyes met his. She heard Alice, too. She straightened up. "That's who you called to," she said. "Huh. Not one of us."

That seemed disagreeable to her. "We've been looking for you forever. Everywhere."

"You should have checked the hospitals." He laughed at his own joke and just as quickly began to cough.

The door opened and the big red-faced nurse entered. She stopped, glancing back as if debating whether to get a crash cart. He waved at her and fought for a calming breath. It felt like swallowing an apple, whole.

"You all right, then?"

He nodded, squeezing tears from his eyes.

"In that case it's time for your—"

"—bath," he finished. He waved his list. "I wrote it down." He remembered her name then. "Gwendolyn."

"Now, Mr. Marsh, I've told you I prefer 'Gwen.'" She came up beside him. The little girl opposite looked the nurse over sullenly. Maybe the girl hated everything.

"You have any idea where that kid came from?"

The nurse matter-of-factly closed the opened curtain on the empty bed, then turned back to him and drew the covers off his pastel-gowned form. "Which kid is that?" she said.

He looked at the girl, who pursed her lips. Her wings buzzed. What kind of kid had bumblebee wings? he wondered. Cherubim and seraphim? He was still waving the list. Deny seeing anything. He shook his head at the nurse. "I don't know. Forget it."

His exposed feet looked worse than his hands, the nails thick, horny, and yellowish. He thought of goats' hooves.

"Now, then," said the nurse, "think you can sit up today?"

He rolled onto his side and pushed up on one elbow. His arm trembled but he managed to hold himself steady until the nurse pulled him upright. "That's a boy," she said. "Do you want a chair or shall we walk?"

"We'll walk, thank you." He slid off the bed onto his feet. A polite cough could have knocked him down but the nurse smiled.

"Well, that's good, that's progress, isn't it?"

"How would I know?" He scowled at her.

Ignoring his comment, she leaned down to place paper slippers on his feet. He lost the first one by the time they reached the door. His left foot dragged. The nurse turned as if to go back for the slipper, but the IV pole rattled as if he might fall without her, and she abandoned it. They continued slowly down the hall. In his peripheral vision he watched the child flit along beside him, appearing to skate on the polished floor. She hummed a little song under her

breath that seemed to burrow into his brain until he recalled the words that accompanied it.

"To the best bride-bed will we," he recited, sing-song.

"What?" the nurse asked.

The clouds rolled in. "Song—part of a song from someplace, I don't know." Radio, he thought. "Big old Emerson radio with a dial bright as a campfire and numbers so big even I could read 'em." The little girl was grinning, which annoyed him no end. She was teasing, provoking him.

The bathroom contained two sunken tubs. The underwater jets in the first were already running. Steel hoses with adjustable nozzles dangled beside the tubs, and there were soap dispensers on the tiled wall above them. He sensed the nurse untying the paper gown at the back and he shrugged it forward off his bony shoulders. He stood at the brink, self-conscious of his withered yet pouchy belly and purposeless scrotum. There was a time ... wasn't there a time? Whatever sense of strength and power he'd known, it was too far from him now.

He stepped in. The nurse clutched his arm to support him until he had sunk into the warm water. It was, he thought, like sitting in a cauldron. His legs beneath the water looked green as dead flesh.

The little girl circled the bath as the nurse soaped him with a sponge. She sat cross-legged to watch, her expression sly.

"Stop staring at me!" he yelled.

The sponge ceased moving against his back and the nurse said, "I'm sorry, I'm not—"

"No, not you. Her!" He thrust one crooked finger at the girl, who shook her head at him as if in disappointment.

"Who, Mr. Marsh?"

He squeezed his eyes shut, remembering the warning he'd written to himself. He must have seen things before, maybe even that simpering little angel of death. He'd learned that others didn't see what he saw. He'd learned to shut up, hadn't he? Warned himself, too.

"Mr. Marsh?"

"What!" The word stabbed the air.

"I want to wash your hair now. You need to lift your head."

"Oh. Oh, yes, all right, Gwendolyn. Gwen." See? He could learn. He licked his dry lips again. At the foot of the tub the little girl was gone.

After the bath, the nurse dried him in a large towel, encased him in a new gown, and walked with him back up the hall to his room. He twisted his head around, fearful that he'd forgotten the list, left it in the bath. Had he taken it with him?

In his room the bedding had been changed, the mattress lowered, and lying on the nightstand was the crumpled paper, safe. He fought down the panic.

Outside, the light was fading. He sat on the edge of the bed, all but exhausted by fear, while the nurse studied his face in obvious distress. He could almost hear her thoughts, the worried doubt behind the look. At last he lay back and she covered him, then patted his cheek. "Dinner will be along soon, you rest." She closed the blinds before leaving.

His whole body felt prickly after the bath, not drowsy at all, but tired. He turned his head, watching the door, anticipating the return of the little girl.

"Bobby, please!" cried Alice next door.

Down the hall, Gwendolyn was telling someone, "He's seeing things again. This time it's people in his room, in the bath. Said he saw a kid," to which someone else replied, "He ain't got no kids."

That was new information. He would have written it down. Where was a pen? Then he became confused. That girl with the wings had told him otherwise. She'd said there was a "they" involved, hadn't she? He wasn't certain any longer. Someone had said something, sung a song, but it was gone. He fumbled blindly at the night stand until his fingers clutched the crumpled list.

9. DINNER

A young man in green scrubs backed in, carrying a tray. After setting it down to the side, the orderly raised the bed again, then lifted the tray, flipped its legs down as if by magic, and settled it over him. "Here you are, sir. Do you need help tonight eating?"

He shook his head and the orderly left him alone A hundred and two and they left him alone. Wasn't that crazy?

The meal proved to be just tolerable, a corn pudding and some sort of meat that had been boiled into insipidness, and a ghastly green gelatin topped with a mush of whipped cream. How was anyone expected to have the will to go on living when fed this crap? He'd probably had the same last night.

Alice was complaining, "No, no," weakly, and he could hear the murmuring of whoever was trying to entice her to eat, the voice so sonorous that he drifted to sleep on it.

When he woke, it was to a doctor prying open his eye and flashing a painfully bright light into it. Moving the light from side to side, the doctor asked, "Can you follow it, Mr. Marsh?"

"What, are you a hypnotist?"

The light went out. "Nope," the doctor said, but in a way that made it sound less like a reply and more like a verdict spoken to someone else beyond the bed.

Afterimages of the light continued to dance in his vision while the doctor marked his chart and then left. The globes of light flitted about, and he found it odd there should be more than one. They were yellowish green and didn't seem to correspond to his eye movements. They came to rest slowly, smoothly.

He tried to ignore them and go back to sleep, but the lights winked out and in their place were darker shapes. One glided to the window and raised the blinds. Panicked, he reached for the call button to get a nurse, but couldn't remember where it was.

Bright moonlight spilled in, illuminating the little winged girl who'd attended his bath. She dropped the draw cord and over her shoulder gave him that same sly look.

Movement on the other side of the bed caught his attention, and he turned his head to find two more winged children tossing a long slender bundle up beside him on the mattress.

It was as big as he was. It spun in place like a bobbin as they snapped the covering off it, and a body flopped against him, the head on the pillows scant inches from his: dead blank eyes in a leathery, wrinkled old face that smelled like a wet rotted forest. The lips were taut as if shrunk back to the gums. He pushed away, a howl of fear caught in his throat as he pressed back against the rail. Something fleshy touched his shoulder.

A woman was leaning against the bed. Beautiful, honey-tressed, with skin as aquamarine as the Aegean Sea (and when had he seen that?). She gazed upon him, her golden eyes brimming with tears. Those eyes ... She wasn't wearing any clothes, nothing more than a few garlands, and the moonlight, which should have silhouetted her, seemed to emerge from her skin, as if she was a softly glowing lantern. She released and lowered the rail on his bed.

He fed upon the view of her, then finally noticed his own hands

clutching the sheets. The moonlight lit them, too, and they looked smooth, the knots gone from his knuckles. He held one up and the palm was as green as ivy, fingers elongated, and like the woman it glowed. Something broke loose deep down in his memory. He could feel it rising slowly, slowly to the surface, a solid memory behind all the fragments he'd experienced. Where was that list? Was this on it? He didn't think so. Didn't think it mattered. The tubes pulled free of his arm and he hardly noticed.

The small winged trio grouped around the woman. Seeing them with their lambent eyes fixed fearfully upon him, he was able to touch a long-lost memory containing them: he heard them chattering, "We don't want to." "What will we tell the mistress?" "She'll be so furious!" "But we must, if it's your will." "We must." And, "Forgive us." He closed his hands into fists, not in anger, but to feel new strength in them. The trio skittered away to the door and pressed against it as if ready to bolt. They watched him nervously.

He had trusted that he would remember who and what he was. The People had always maintained that changelings didn't recall much because they were feeble-minded to begin with, though even the swapped infant didn't remember anything of itself either. But the babe was mortal, a pathetic thing so easily toyed with. He, the most powerful of the People save perhaps for she who sat beside him now, had expected to don a mortal form with his faculties intact. In his hubris, he'd trusted an untested conviction, crossed over and been lost both to himself and to them.

It was supposed to have been a simple act, time spent among the humans to better understand them and their grim estate.

He'd made a list of things he wanted to learn about them—and that seemed to be the only trait of his that had survived the transformation. Most of all he'd wanted to understand why if they were so pathetic she amused herself with so many mortal lovers; what was it about their brief lives that appealed to her? Filthy stupid creatures. That was what they were—what he'd thought of them.

She placed her hand upon his and it was cool and moist. He looked into her golden eyes. Oh, he appreciated now how close he had come. This glamour he had worn for a century was about to consume him like a shriveling cocoon. He'd spiraled into dementia, into paranoid terrors and hallucinations. He could remember them all now, as he could remember the looks he'd received as more and more of him had splintered. Another day or two ... a week. He sat up on the bed and let the glamour crack and fall away, to dust. He embraced her, pulled her to him, kissed her and whispered into her shell-like ear, "Titania." He knew himself again.

For her it had been perhaps a decade or so. For him it was an eternity, lost in a mortal life span with the barest inkling that he was somehow different, and then the inevitable decline, his faculties failing, thoughts like fireflies in a dark forest. He could trace it all now—the kindnesses and indignities, the fleeting joys, the lingering sorrows. He glanced back at poor Marsh, the real Marsh, the dry corpse at his side. "I stole your time," he told it. Marsh would have suffered terribly in arriving here, surging from suspended childhood to dotage the instant he crossed the barrier back to this side. A mortal body had to obey mortal time, and ten years with the People was a century here.

His old self would have sneered at Marsh's pain. Now, here, he hollow and ashamed. Well, that was why he'd done it, was it not? To feel? He'd desired a taste of the agonies of mortality and nearly been swallowed whole by its unraveling.

Through the wall he heard a weak and terrible cry. He could stand it no more. He, not even human, couldn't bear the cruelty they inflicted upon each other through this disregard. He rose up and passed through the wall as though it were vapor.

It was as big as he was. It spun in place like a bobbin as they snapped the covering off it, and the body flopped against him, the head on the pillows scant inches from his: dead blank eyes in a leathery, wrinkled old face that smelled like rotted forest.

Alice was attached to more machines than he'd been. Her arms were tied to the rails. He glided beside her bed, tore the strap from her wrist, and clasped her hand. He found the image in her mind and let her reshape his otherness into the glamour she wanted to see. "Bobby," she cried, "Oh, Bobby."

"Shh," said the young bearded man beside her. He brushed her cheek and bent low to place a kiss upon her lips. "Hush now, it's time to go." He whispered it in her ear, and his cool palm rested upon her forehead. She sobbed only once before he drew back. Her smile had softened, and her eyes were closed forever.

One of the little ones, Mote, had dashed in after him and watched all this with disbelieving eyes. He swallowed the clutch of sorrow as Bobby's glamour evaporated with Alice's final breath. One of the monitors sounded a steady note and an alarm went off down the hall. He could hear distant chairs pushing back and soft-soled shoes slapping the floor as the nurses ran.

He winked at the little one and made himself say, "A small diversion," as if it was all a joke. Then he turned her and pushed her ahead of him back through the wall.

"Quickly now," he said to the room, "before they look in here, too." He called them from the door—Peaseblossom and Mustardseed—and with his arm around Titania's waist, he floated through the glass window, his entourage diving headlong after him. The moonbeams subsumed them all.

On the bed, beside the body of someone once briefly named Marsh, a crumpled list lifted and spun in an unnatural breeze, floated back and forth to the floor, and came to rest with a final swirl in the puddle beneath the dangling tubes, which dripped their saline tears onto it until the words had completely bled away. ❧

BY JOSH ROUNTREE AND MIKAL TRIMM
ILLUSTRATION BY KURT HUGGINS AND ZELDA DEVON

Fragments of a Fantasy Life

The human mind can be a dangerous place. Venture too deep inside and you can get lost forever.

Julia followed the path of body parts through the woods, plucking up each in turn to deposit into her bag. They wound like a breadcrumb trail toward a witch's cottage, but this was no fairy tale and Julia expected something far worse waited for her at the end.

Her feet trod on grass and bent flowers, wet with either water or blood. It was difficult to tell in the gloom cast by the towering trees. Leaves spoke to her, though there was no wind. Just the occasional kiss of air that Julia shooed away like an insect.

Memories, like ghosts, hung in the haze, swirling around her in this spectral world of dreams. The place was unfamiliar, yet she had only the barest recollection of being elsewhere. The only truth still contained in her mind was the need to collect the parts. All that remained of her husband and her son. And somewhere, at the end of the path, they would come together again.

Already she had a few scavenged bits in her bag. A foot that belonged to her husband, and both of her boy's tiny hands. She had no idea if all the pieces were here, or exactly what would happen when she collected them. But her task was set and the woods brooked no argument.

Julia knelt and brushed back a wild growth of ivy. There, tucked between two great tree roots that clawed up from beneath the soil rested another piece of her husband. The heart thumped silently, its cavities shot through with vines. Julia pulled them gently away and stood. The heart was warm in her hands. Tears burned her face as she gave the heart a kiss, and claimed from the abyss of memory one pure vivid moment of the man she was desperate to remember.

"I wonder what it's going to be." Her husband (Chris? Phil? Danny? Something simple, something normal, she felt, but she couldn't decide) lay on the bed next to her, both of them naked, both excited. He had his ear tight to her still-flat stomach, his hands on either side of her waist, as if her midsection were some fragile container.

Julia ran her fingers through his hair (black? brown? curly, yes, but what color, she could remember his words, his position, but not his appearance), said, "A boy, probably. Or a girl. All depends on that X chromosome, right?"

He raised his head, looked at her with his (colorless, just for now they're colorless, sorry honey) eyes, and in all seriousness said, "Oh, no. What if it's a dog? What if it's a schnauzer?"

Julia tugged his hair, hard.

"No, worse—what if it's a whole litter of schnauzers? You don't have enough breasts for that!"

Julia started laughing, low in her belly, and her man put his head back on her stomach. She watched it bob up and down, which only made it harder for her to keep a straight face.

"It's rumbling in there—I think it's hungry. Oh, crap. What if it's a Great White? How long do they gestate? It could eat you alive from the inside!" and at this he wrapped his lips around her belly button, shouting into her stomach. "Doon ead wy wife! Fleas, fleas, doon do it, shark-voy!"

It tickled. Julia erupted, a Vesuvius of giggles and snorts, and she steamrollered him, pushing his head back into the pillow and winding up on top. She leered, winked, and gyrated against him. "Make me laugh now."

He lay there, looking up at her nude torso, then into her eyes. "We can't do this. The Great White might bite it off."

Then she proved to him that he was safe.

"Stephen."

Her voice was the only sound in the suddenly hushed woods, and she got the sense someone was listening to see what she'd say next. The name had returned to her as vividly as the images of their last perfect day together. Stephen. Not Steve unless you wanted to earn a sour look.

She whispered the name again, testing it in hopes it was some kind of magical key to unlock her prison of memories and set them loose. But it was just a name. She put it in a safe place in her mind, just as she deposited his heart into her bag. Later, these things would be of use. She was certain.

Julia stood, wiped the earth from her knees. Dragging the bag behind her, she continued down the path, in search of the next piece of her life that must lie somewhere ahead in the undergrowth. Cold night pulled at the hairs on her arms, and she could feel the wash of moonlight settle on her skin like a net of spider webs. She brushed it away.

The silence in the woods was uncanny; even the leaves refused to crack and hiss as they rained down from unseen heights and swirled in circles, stirred by a wind she couldn't feel. She tried to speak, but her voice rebelled. She'd spoken only moments ago, but it seemed impossible now to break such perfect silence.

Then a small hand tugged at her skirt and she screamed.

"You've made a bad choice, Julia," said a reed-thin voice. Julia whirled and saw a child standing before her, his hand still held up where it had been clutching her hem. He stared up at her and she realized he wasn't a child, wasn't technically even a he. The thing stood no higher than her waist, pale sexless flesh patched with random bits of fur, twin horns coiled on either side of its head. Its tiny legs angled back into hooves. Julia gave a yelp and backed away.

"You should not be here," continued the creature, as if it hadn't noticed her fear. It sniffed the air and pawed the ground with one hoof. "How did you get here?"

"I don't know," she whispered.

"You must know," it said, growing impatient. "I told you not to come and now you have. Nobody can bring you here without your consent. I told you this is hopeless."

The creature poked at her bag and Julia pulled it away, protectively. "What are you talking about?"

"You're a fool," said the creature. It sniffed again, knelt and began rooting in the soil with its hands. It came away with a buried prize and thrust it up for her to see. An eye. Not a brown one—Stephen's eyes were brown, she remembered that now, just like his hair—but a blue one. Like hers. Like ... what was his name?

"Who are you?"

"You don't even remember?" the creature said, not bothering to hide its disgust.

"No. I'm sorry. Really. Can you please just tell me where I am?"

"Where you're not supposed to be."

"You're wrong. I'm supposed to be here," she said. "That's the only thing I'm sure of."

The creature snorted. "There you go again. Relying on feelings instead of what's real. Haven't you learned yet that indulging in that kind of idiocy can be dangerous?"

"I don't remember you!" she shrieked, surprising herself with the venom in her tone. "I don't even know what you are!"

"You know who I am," the creature said, grinning. And as the shadows raced around it like a cloak, sucking all warmth from the air, she remembered who he was.

And she remembered what he was.

Julia drove herself to her doctor's appointment. Stephen wanted to come with her, he really did, but he worked so much overtime these days, bringing in extra money to take care of all the expenses a baby—even one not yet born—entailed. Before she went for her sonogram, she asked him if they should try to find out what sex the baby was or keep it a surprise.

"Find out, definitely. We'll love it either way, and if you know what you're going to have, the women at your baby shower know whether to bring pink or blue. Otherwise, all you'll get is diapers and yellow onesies, and who wants that?" He laughed.

Now, lying on the exam table, her stomach coated with thick gel, she waited to find out. The doctor prodded her stomach with the paddle, trying to make the baby turn and quit hiding itself. "This is a shy one," he chuckled, moving the sensor slowly down below her navel, then just as slowly up one side. "Move those legs a little, junior ..."

Julia couldn't make out a thing. Even when the doctor pointed out the head, the tiny hands and feet, she saw only fluctuations in the screen. Concentrating on the meaningless image made her eyes tired, and the doctor's sing-song voice—"Move around, move around, up and down, up and down, let me see what your hiding, little miss or mister"—lulled her even more.

When she finally made out an image, it wasn't a baby. Not her baby, couldn't be, but something darker, something misshapen and inhuman, a darkness wrapped around where her baby lay huddled in its grip. She felt a voice in her head, not heard, it felt it. You don't see me, young Earth-mother, you don't see old Bandy Tam here in this fine fine cradle with my new little pet, now do you? The room is warm and your eyes are tired and the silly man is singing lullabies, listen, listen ...

... and then the doctor shook her shoulder, apologized for not noticing she'd fallen asleep, and told her he hoped she wanted a boy.

"A boy what?" she'd said, and then wondered why the doctor laughed.

That night she tried to explain to Stephen about the dream-vision she'd had at the doctor's office, but it sounded ridiculous even to her, so she waved the subject away with an all-encompassing swoosh of her hand. Instead, she spent half the night watching Stephen do variations of his Daddy-dance while singing, "I'm going to have a son, boom! I'm going to have a son, boom!" He punctuated each boom with a spine-jarring pelvic thrust, and Julia giggled away most of her fears. Obviously, it did make a difference whether she had a boy or a girl.

By the time she slept, she could almost pretend she'd never felt that dry, whispery voice inside her.

"This is a place to lose your past," said Bandy Tam. "Why draw these memories back to you?"

The heavy mists burned away in sudden daylight. Only seconds ago Julia had been draped in the cool weight of midnight, and now the sun came to chase the comfortable darkness from her new world. In the gloom, she'd been able to fool herself. Maybe Bandy Tam was just another memory, come to haunt her for a spell before disappearing into an unreachable past. If she closed her eyes, he might just disappear. But as the sun screamed skyward, whipping long shadows in a furious rush to wherever it is shadows go to hide, Tam remained, staring thoughtfully up at her, every facet of his twisted

body revealed.

She knew it was him, yet something about him, possibly everything about him, was different. She couldn't recall his proper form, but she knew it wasn't this forest imp he'd chosen to impersonate.

Julia shivered. "How can I get back my past if I don't remember it?"

"I have never met a person as stubborn as you," said Tam. His irritation at her unexpected arrival had faded. Now he studied her with sad eyes. "We discussed this on the other side. No matter how much you wish it, you cannot change what has passed. This is a dangerous place for your kind. You were never meant to be here. Let me help you return to your life."

Julia spotted a pair of ears in the grass. She hurried to gather them. The sunlight revealed more bits of her family farther up the path and she resolved to take advantage. Night might fall again any moment. It seemed this place had no use for time.

Bandy Tam sighed and followed her. "What do you expect to accomplish here? Collecting what's left won't bring them back. You think this is some sort of puzzle? This is a product of your mind. Those pieces of your family aren't really there. Living in your imagination is not very healthy, you know."

"You're wrong." Julia pulled Stephen's hand from the undergrowth and twined her fingers between his. She held her arm out so that Tam could inspect her find. "I can still feel the pulse in his thumb. I can feel the calluses on the ends of his fingers that he got from playing guitar for so many years. I can trace the lifeline across his palm. I know this hand and what it feels like. This is real. These parts are leading me somewhere. And when I gather them all, I'll find a way to put them back together."

Bandy Tam frowned, then his flesh softened, twisted, writhed, until the person standing before her had changed entirely. It was a young boy, dark hair in need of a cut, wearing a familiar green t-shirt silk-screened with rampaging dinosaurs. It was her son, and he spoke to her in a high voice. She'd spent nearly a week crying when she realized she'd never hear that voice again. And now here it was, and it terrified her.

"Sorry, mommy," it said. "There is no putting me back together."

When the baby decided to join the outside world, he came fast. Julia barely remembered the frantic drive to the hospital, just flashes of intimacy—squeezing Stephen's hand, nearly screaming every time he had to let her go to change gears, his ridiculous chorus of huffa huffa huffa whenever the next contraction hit—and then she lay in the hospital waiting for the epidural, gowned out and ready to blow. No natural childbirth for her, no way, and screw the manuals.

Her son disagreed vehemently, insisting on squirming his way to freedom before the nurse could even prep her for the needle. Counting from the moment the water broke, the drive to the hospital, the check-in, and the sudden appearance of the new family member took less than two hours.

Her doctor congratulated her, right there in the delivery room. "Julia, you are truly blessed. I figured you'd be in labor all night, considering your frame and this being your first baby. But it's almost like you had someone inside you pushing the baby out from the other end."

Julia wanted to give a ragged cheer, maybe, or a high five, just listening to him, but she hurt and she wanted to sleep and even Stephen, sitting down at the doctor's viewpoint between her legs and making nonclinical oohs and aahs at the sight of the afterbirth, couldn't keep her from browning out, slipping into her own little twilight zone. She thought of a shadow posing as her son's twin, pushing and pushing inside her, then some otherwhere she could barely glimpse, and finally she was gone, gone, gone ...

Bandy Tam no longer resembled her son, no longer resembled anything, really. He'd fled the physical world and was again inside her, haunting her mind and soul as he had throughout her pregnancy, an invisible goblin of doubt and insecurity that constantly beckoned her to another world, another existence for herself apart from the terrifying reality of pending parenthood. Bandy Tam's presence had been a constant lure toward escape that undermined even her love for the life growing inside her.

The birth had somehow allowed Tam to escape from her mind and take form. Yet now, he was back, exerting his will on her from the inside. And that was far more frightening than any physical form he could take to taunt her.

The forest swirled around Julia like a spinning green storm and she crumbled under the weight of her family. The bag pulled her down and she knelt in the undergrowth, head pressed against the coolness of it, trying to keep her mind together. Trying to tame the dizziness and forestall the unwanted memories. But she'd asked for this, she'd resisted Bandy Tam's advice. She'd wanted to remember, and now she couldn't stop.

Stephen played with the baby—Andrew, they'd named him Andrew, remember remember remember—much more than she did. He dressed Andrew in gossamer lip-farts, sucked his toes like they were sweet corn kernels, wanted to bathe the boy in his little sink-bath after every diaper change, if only Julia would allow.

When Stephen was home, everything played out like the perfect old movie—loving mother, giving father, adored baby.

While Stephen worked, though, Julia found things difficult. Andrew never settled down for her like he did for Stephen. He mewled constantly, quieting only at her breast, and then for a short while when he fell asleep after the feeding. She'd look at Andrew's face, finally in repose, and search for shadows hidden beneath his features. She didn't know why.

"If you are so keen to collect your past, let me steer your search a bit. A supermarket parking lot. A kiss. The first time we met in the flesh. Open your eyes and see it all again."

Then Stephen would come home, and Andrew would turn into a bubbling spit-fountain, a red-cheeked cherub from a Renaissance painting. Stephen played guitar for Andrew, sang ridiculous made-up songs, using animal voices for words. Andrew, even when he was too young to actually produce a laugh, would watch his father intently, his barely focusing eyes always pointed directly at Stephen.

Julia might've been jealous if she weren't so relieved. When Stephen came home, she found the time to rest. The darkness retreated.

So you think the child didn't love you? **Bandy Tam's voice** echoed in her mind and she yelped in surprise. It had been a long time since she'd felt that intimate violation of her thoughts, and tears welled in her eyes. Why was this happening again? What had she done to deserve Bandy Tam?

He loved you as any child loves its mother. And yet babies are far more insightful that you'd imagine. It's quite possible, you know, that little Andrew knew how you felt about him. No wonder, then, he preferred his father.

Julia shook her head violently.

Tam was a liar. It was his nature.

She had to believe that.

Stephen started telling Andrew stories every night after his first birthday. Fairy tales, filtered through Stephen's personal sense of humor. They made little sense by the end, but Andrew didn't understand all the words anyway. Julia found herself using them as

her own bedtime stories, only interrupting when Stephen went a little too far off the path.

"So Snow White lived with these seven little guys, and she cleaned their house, and she cleaned their clothes, and sometimes she cleaned their pipes—"

"Stephen!"

"That was for you, sweetie—it's not like he gets it!"

Then one night, "And the grizzled little man told her, 'You can't have your child back unless you can guess my name!' Now, Andy, I can't imagine what the old guy wanted with a baby, but I think he was a big old pervert myself."

"Stephen!"

"I know, I know. That was for y—"

"No!" Julia felt a turmoil in her stomach, like the contractions all over again. "It's just, just the story. I don't like that story."

"It's Rumplestiltskin, Julia. You must've heard it about a thousand times growing up."

"I don't like it, Stephen." And a shadow crossed her heart, and her stomach felt the darkness, and she threw up all over her husband and her son and herself, as if she wanted to expel a cancer by the most expedient means available.

You're not so good at this remembering thing. I was out of you long before that. I spilled out with the baby. No reason to stay after he's gone, right? It wasn't like you were paying me any heed. I offered a way out. A way to save you from the tragedy to come. But you preferred to think of me as some kind of monster come to steal your child, destroy your marriage, wreck your life. You chose the child over happiness. You refused my dream world but now you've run away to one of your own making. That just won't do. I told you that, remember?

Julia couldn't respond, even with her thoughts. The forest was gone and nothing remained of the world but Tam's voice and the vivid light cast in her mind by the fires of her past.

If you are so keen to collect your past, let me steer your search a bit. A supermarket parking lot. A kiss. The first time we met in the flesh. Open your eyes and see it all again.

Stephen was cheating on her. Julia knew it, deep in her heart. She knew it as she trundled the cart down the aisles of the Food King, Andrew sitting up in the basket and crying "Want! Want!" like a hungry bird whenever he noticed some sugary snack he'd seen in commercials on Nickelodeon. She knew it as she stood in the checkout, her hair disarrayed, Andrew wailing openly because she refused to buy Blue's Clues cereal for him. She knew when the girl at the register gave her an oh-so-sarcastic look and said, "He sure has a pair of lungs on him, don't he?"

She had no proof, but she knew.

She'd look at herself in the mirror at night, fresh from a shower, and she'd still see traces of stretch marks on her stomach, stubborn pockets of fat on her thighs, dark circles under her eyes—all products of pregnancy, all blemishes that should have faded by now, faded, damn it, but still clung to her like leeches, draining her of any beauty or sexiness she'd ever possessed. No wonder Stephen was always working so many hours, no wonder he came home so tired, too tired for sex, what a lie, he wasn't too tired before Andrew came along, he wasn't too tired during the pregnancy either, no, he'd never ever been too tired for sex, which meant he was just too tired for sex with her.

Bastard.

So she pushed her shopping cart with the glitchy front wheel through the parking lot, Andrew wailing at the top of his lungs still, and she rammed it accidentally-on-purpose into the back of her car leaving a nice silver scrape on the trunk lid. Andrew shook back and forth in the basket, hitting his lip on the handle and going from wail to scream, and she wanted to scream herself hell with this hell with it all oh damn damn damn I'm DONE WITH THIS ...

"Here, let me help you with that. You seem to be having a very hard day."

A leg, no time to stop, but she wanted it, she needed it, and she bent down in mid-stride, grabbing the limb and then falling, rolling, doing her best to keep her bag of family safe.

The voice came to her as if whispered in her ear. An accent, vaguely European maybe, with a silky flow, soothing. She turned, already saying, "No, thanks but no, just a fussy child, no big deal—"

Then the man laughed, came up beside her, and she saw him. Tall, but not towering, strong but not muscle-bound, well-groomed but in no way metrosexual. "Seriously, lovely lady, allow me to intervene. I have a way with children."

And before Julia could raise a hand in protest, the handsome, no beautiful man bent over, took Andrew's chin lovingly in his palm, and said, "Ah, it's been a cruel, cruel day for you, hasn't it, boy-child? Life is so hard on the young."

Then the stranger pursed his lips, his warm, perfectly formed lips, and kissed Andrew on the forehead, once, little more than a peck.

Julia barely had time to register the thought that she wished this man would kiss her as well, only more intimately (*lovely lady, he called me lovely*), when she found herself confronted with silence.

Andrew sat in the cart, his eyes wide and locked on the stranger's face. And then Andrew smiled.

A voice, not the stranger's but similar and even more intimate, spoke in her head. *This is how it could be. Always and always, no mess, no anger, just love and peace and happiness. This is the life you deserve, Earth-mother, this is how it could be for ever, forever, for you. Lady-In-Waiting to Princess to Queen ...*

Julia snatched Andrew roughly from the cart, turned to the tall dark one (only now he seemed taller and darker, must be the angle of the sun) and said again, "No. Thanks for trying to help, but we'll be just fine. Really."

The man doffed an imaginary hat and turned away, still smiling, still chuckling. Julia thought she heard him say, "Will you?" as he walked away, but she couldn't be sure.

"He wasn't."

Julia spoke in a whisper, hardly loud enough to hear herself. Tam smiled inside her, and the feeling caused her to shudder. *Are you so sure?*

"He wasn't!" Suddenly, Julia felt the grass between her fingers. She opened her eyes and saw the green strands twining between them. Raindrops pierced the suddenly still forest and she relished the cold touch of each one. She was aware again of the trees around her, the smell of cedar, and the taste of soil in her mouth where her face had been pressed against the earth.

She fought back the memories, because what were they really but signposts marking each failing of her life? It was what Tam wanted, no matter what he said. Julia, wallowing in her misery until her soul was sick enough to accept his easy out. To follow him to whatever other world he claimed was her rightful place. To escape. To die? She'd never understood, but she knew this thing had taken everything from her, and she didn't intend to let him have any more.

Julia couldn't remember precisely what had happened next in her other life, but the growing sickness in her gut told her it wasn't something she wanted to relive. She wailed, on her hands and knees now, and Bandy Tam screamed in reply.

"Stephen ... did ... not ... cheat ... on ... me!"

Stop this, woman! I'm just trying to help you.

Julia screamed, pushed with her soul, and felt Tam begin to

emerge. Her sanity stretched to its breaking point as she forced him from inside her, willing his expulsion from her body, from her thoughts. He had no physical form, but the shadows that sustained him screamed from her flesh, laying open strips of skin as they fled the force of her desire. She wailed beneath the roaring skies, then suddenly Tam was out.

She fell back and rested against her bag, taking twisted comfort from the bits of her family she'd collected within. Her breath came in gasps and her muscles throbbed in pain but her thoughts were clear again, free from Tam's influence. She hadn't recovered all her memories, but she could do so at her own pace now. Without Tam's force-feeding.

The shadows knitted at her feet. Julia struggled to stand and dragged the bag with her. A man grew from the spiraling shadows, a writhing mass of liquid darkness glistening in the rain, smiling at her with her husband's mouth.

"You always were stubborn, Jules. And you always were an idiot."

"I'm not impressed by your magic anymore," said Julia, slinging the bag over her shoulders. It should be far too heavy for her to carry like that, but she felt energized, a benefactor of this place's strangeness as opposed to a victim. "And I'm not convinced by your lies."

"I'm tired of this." Tam spoke in his own voice now, though he still resembled her husband. "Some women, some foolish things, they don't know what's best for them. They need someone like me to instruct them. You will never be happy in your world, or even this ridiculous world of your own making. But in mine? Ah, if you only knew the joys of mine. No matter, you'll know soon enough."

The thing that looked like her husband suddenly melted into a bubbling pool of ink, and a new head emerged, toothy, feral, and anything but human. A body began to form behind it, and Julia, panicked, began to wonder if it was possible to run with the bag on her back, to find the witch's house before Bandy Tam could catch her.

Then she saw twin flames come alive in the wolf's eyes, and heard the animal's strangled cries as it worked to free itself from its primordial pool. Those eyes fixed on her and the thing spoke. "It's far better if you come with me willingly, but by no means is it necessary."

Then Julia was in motion, sprinting down the path with a tight grip on her bag.

Behind her, the wolf howled its freedom.

Must reach the cottage.

Julia ran, the bag slapping against her back, heavy enough to throw off her step with each thwack against her. Still she ran, like a drunkard, like a cripple, fighting for each footstep.

A leg, no time to stop, but she wanted it, she needed it, and she bent down in mid-stride, grabbing the limb and then falling, rolling, doing her best to keep her bag of family safe. Up, quick, run again, stay ahead ...

Her mind ran as well, down too many paths at once, fragmenting itself like the pieces of her husband, her son.

The wolf is coming, Miss Hood, and you're not at Grandma's yet ...

"Let's all go to Chuck E. Cheese's. I got off early, and Andrew just loves the place."

Stephen, always happy, always joking Stephen.

Julia dropped the mop. The dishwasher broke earlier that afternoon, churning out smelly gray water all across the kitchen floor. To add insult to injury, the washing machine decided to play along. She'd used all their towels first to try to stem the tide, then realized she fought a losing battle.

Andrew spent the afternoon walking around her legs and saying, "Flood, Mommy. You made a flood in the kitchen." Over and over, like he was some brain-dead zombie child at four years old, like Mommy didn't see the damn water.

First thing Stephen said? "Where's the Ark?"

And Andrew started singing the few words he remembered from "The Unicorn Song."

And Stephen's answer to all this was pizza? Julia cursed Shel Silverstein under her breath, scooted Andrew out of the kitchen, and slapped the mop against the floor. "You go Now. Take the kid with you. Mommy needs to do some fu-" She stopped, bit her lip, "some freaking cleaning up around here."

—still running, no grab the foot, don't fall I feel dizzy don't let *the wolf catch me—*

"Yeah. Okay, baby Want me to get you something?"Stephen looking old now, and how could she never have noticed the shadows under his eyes, the way his clothes hung loose on him, like he'd been sick and dropped weight he didn't need to lose. How could she have possibly missed the sad, miserable slant to his once-perfect smile?

But she didn't notice any of that, she just said, "Yeah. Get me another life."

The wolf was close now, and Julia ran harder, not looking for pieces, just running for her life. No, no, I never said that, I'm not mean, I'm not some kind of cold-hearted witch-bitch woman—no, not me, never never never! Then the wolf's breath was on her neck, and the land was suddenly cold again. Unimaginably cold.

Julia cleaned the floor, wondering when Stephen would just grow up, wondering when Andrew would just grow up, wondering when the rest of her family would just accept the fact that life wasn't a lark, a walk in the park. It took work and effort and giving, giving. Giving away what you have, what you wanted.

"Life is not a fairy tale!" she shouted at the mop, at the dripping towels, at the empty house.

I have you now. **The Tam-wolf whispered in her ear, her mind,** her womb, but then she saw the hut in the distance and found more speed within her. There were no gingerbread walls, no gumdrop siding, no icing hanging from the eaves, just chipped whitewashed wood panels and a leaning stone chimney, surrounded by a crush of thorn bushes and angry trees. But it had to be the place she was seeking. It was the end of the path. No smoke came from the chimney despite the night's cold, but the witch must still be there. Had to be there.

She was on her knees, still sopping up water when the police knocked on her door. They were polite, formal, uncomfortable. One of them had tears in his eyes as he spoke. One of those freak occurrences, he said. Some idiot with a gun and a problem, just shooting random folks.Your husband tried to protect your son. He got in a corner, covered the boy with his body. He did everything a good Dad could do.

And Julia nodded, saw spots, fainted. Then, in the edges of her vision, as the policemen did what they could to bring her back to some semblance of life in this most horrible, dangerous of places, she caught a glimpse of the otherworld. And she saw Bandy Tam. He spoke to her then, in a voice only she could hear. And she suddenly understood who he was, what he wanted, and how very disappointed he was in her. He'd known all along this would happen.

Finally the police left her alone, and she let her mind seek her otherworld again. Tam lashed out in her thoughts, warning her not to run, but she dove into a closing wormhole of psychic darkness, and left his protests behind.

Julia could practically feel the wolf's jaws snapping together on the back of her neck, ripping her spine out in one frenzied flip of his head. Then she burst through the cottage door and slammed it behind her, fumbled for the thick wooden crossbar and dropped it securely into place, sealing the wolf outside. She expected to hear the thunder of his body against the door, and the crack and splinter of wood as it bowed inward. But there was nothing but the musty smell of desertion and the silence of empty space.

Continued on page 90

BY
WILLIAM P. WANDLESS
ILLUSTRATION
BY ERIC DESCHAMPS

Pumkin-jumper

Traditions are important
in holding a neighborhood together.

Or in tearing it apart.

The Andersons moved to Poplar Hollow at the height of a hectic harvest season, which is why no one went to warn them. When Pumpkinjumper came to call, he caught them by surprise.

If the neighbor women had remembered, they would have left Pumpkinjumper some knitting to unravel, just enough to keep him busy until the moon had set. If the neighbor men had remembered, they would have left Pumpkinjumper a drawstring pouch full of acorn caps. He would raise Cain in their coops and barns, whistling till the break of dawn, but he would make no other mischief. Devoted to disorder though he was, he still observed the old covenant. He never bedeviled a family twice, so long as it paid him his due.

Everyone had to pay, one way or another, and if he felt slighted or shortchanged, Pumpkinjumper had been known to claim more than most folks were willing to give.

On Wednesday, two days before the night of the harvest moon, Pumpkinjumper ambled down the Andersons' driveway, turned down the walk that led to their door, and checked the front stoop. Nothing had been left for him.

"Might they be sick?" he inquired of an owl. "Might they be poor?" he asked a bat as it flapped past. Pumpkinjumper clucked his tongue and left the Andersons his own silver whistle. If they had nothing else to offer, they could put it in a box, tie it up with string, and simply give it back.

The next morning Mandy Mae found the whistle on the stoop. "Finders keepers," she said, and dropped it in her pocket. By noon she had forgotten all about it.

On Thursday, one day before the night of the harvest moon, Pumpkinjumper ambled down the Andersons' driveway on his short, spindly legs and turned down the front walk. There were many boxes on the porch, and he danced a little jig in his excitement.

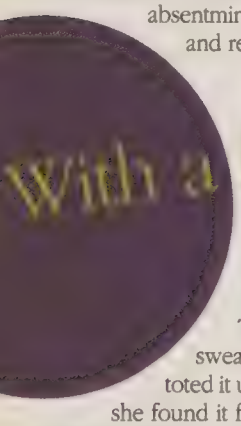
To his surprise, however, all the boxes were entirely empty; the Andersons had not even returned his silver whistle. He strolled around the house, thinking perhaps they had left something for him on a windowsill or by the back door—they were new to the neighborhood, after all—but he found nothing.

"Well," he complained to a sleeping raven, "that's mighty ungenerous of them." He leaned on his walking stick and looked out at the barren fields behind the Andersons' house. "Do you reckon they traded my whistle for seed?" he asked a spinning spider. "If they had to go so far, they must be poor indeed."

With that he doffed his own jack-o'-lantern sweater, left for him by Sadie Campbell more than twenty years before. It was so handsome he could not bring himself to unravel it. It would make a fine gift, one he would be happy to receive again. He laid it carefully on the front stoop and, his bare black feathers glossy in the moonlight, he sang out to the Andersons:

Beggared once and beggared twice
To stead you in the sacrifice;
If I should find me beggared thrice,
I must exact a third-night's price.

All three Andersons stirred in their sleep, but none of them woke. Pumpkinjumper scratched his crow's-foot sigil in the dirt with his walking stick outside their kitchen window, a last reminder to the absentminded family. He folded his wings against the cold and returned from whence he came.



With a flourish and a whirl, Pumpkinjumper threw his straw hat in the air. When it came

The next morning Mandy Mae discovered the sweater on the stoop. "Finders keepers," she said, and toted it up to her room. It was much too small for her, but she found it fit Buster Bear perfectly. He was by far the most festive bear at tea. In the afternoon she found the sigil, which to her looked very much like the sketch of an especially promising Christmas tree. She filled in the missing limbs and etched a star at the top.

On Friday, the first night of the harvest moon, Pumpkinjumper shuffled down the Andersons' driveway, dragging his heels in the dirt. From the lane he could see quite well the empty stoop that awaited him, and his love of mischief was not so strong that he did not miss his silver whistle and his favorite sweater. He made a slow, unhopeful round about the Andersons' house, checking the porch, the windowsills, and the back steps before returning to the front stoop. He found the promising boxes stacked with the trash, and he saw his sigil defaced, replaced by a symbol ill suited to the season.

"Neither poor nor sick, I think, if they have time to clean and play," he said to a dawdling moth. "Be they churls, ingrates, or fools, they have a price to pay."

Pumpkinjumper peered into each window of the Andersons' house, keen to see what the moonlight might reveal. At last he found the article he felt inclined to claim.

He tapped at the window of Mandy Mae's bedroom and sat on the sill till she came. "Good evening," he said, taking off his hat and making a low bow. "I am Pumpkinjumper, knight errant of the Court of the Pumpkin King. Could you tell me where I might find the nearest castle?"

Mandy Mae squinted, blinked, and rubbed her eyes. She had never spoken to a crow before, nor had she ever seen one that wore overalls and a straw hat. "You don't look like a knight," she said.

"Have you ever seen a knight before?" Pumpkinjumper asked.

"No," Mandy Mae admitted, "not in person."

"Then you'll have to take my word for it until you see another," he said quite reasonably. Pumpkinjumper stepped to the side of the sill and gestured toward the open field. "Surely there's a castle somewhere nearby," he continued. "Could you tell me where to find it? I'm on a terribly important quest."

"A quest?" she inquired.

"Aye, a quest. Quests are like errands, if errands were terribly important," he explained.

"What kind of quest?" Mandy Mae asked.

"I must find the Pumpkin Princess," he said, "and I haven't a moment to spare." He looked off into the distance, raising a wing as if to shield his eyes.

Mandy Mae opened the window and scanned the moonlit field with him. "We just moved here," she said. "I don't remember seeing a castle when we were driving in."

"I was afraid you would say that," Pumpkinjumper said, his shoulders slumping. "I was told she would be hard to find. She might be in disguise, or she might be in hiding. She might not even know she is the Princess."

"That's silly," Mandy Mae protested. "Why wouldn't she want to be a princess? And if she doesn't know who she is, how will you?"

Pumpkinjumper wagged a forefeather at Mandy Mae. "She's not just any princess," he explained, "but the Pumpkin Princess. She's got to preside over all the pumpkin parties, choose what games the Pumpkin Court will play, and even decide what we will eat for dessert at breakfast, lunch, and dinner." He shook his head ruefully. "If you knew of all the parties we throw, all the games we know, and all the puddings, custards, pies, and cakes we have in the kingdom, you'd appreciate what a terrible business it can be."

Mandy Mae looked up at the swollen moon. "It sounds quite nice," she said wistfully. "I'm sorry you haven't been able to find her."

He turned from Mandy Mae and fanned his wings. "I've searched for weeks and weeks," he sighed, "and I haven't even found a single girl with a silver whistle, much less a full-fledged princess."

"What's so special about a girl with a silver whistle?" Mandy Mae inquired.

Pumpkinjumper gaped at Mandy Mae. "Why, that would be the most special kind of special!" he exclaimed. "Sometimes an ornery old witch will curse the Pumpkin Princess with forgetfulness. She won't remember who she is, but a noble knight errant," he said,

puffing up his chest, "will know her by a token, an emblem, and a test." Pumpkinjumper whistled through his beak. "To find the cursed Pumpkin Princess—now that would be something."

"A silver whistle doesn't seem like a very special token to me," Mandy Mae said. "Even I have one."

Pumpkinjumper staggered on the sill. "May I see it?" he asked, clutching the feathers over his heart.

Mandy Mae rummaged through the pockets of her jacket until she found the whistle. When he saw it in her palm, Pumpkinjumper swooned. "Goodness gracious!" he cried, sagging against the window jamb and marveling at Mandy Mae. "Wherever did you get it?"

"Someone left it on the front steps," she said with a shrug. "Finders keepers, losers weepers."

"Indeed," he said. "That's a very old rule—almost as old as I am." Pumpkinjumper regarded her and cocked his little head. "Tell me, miss," he continued, "do you have the habit of a herald as well?"

"I bite my fingernails sometimes," she said, furrowing her brow. "Mother says I shouldn't."

"No, not that kind of habit," Pumpkinjumper said. "When the Pumpkin Princess returns to the kingdom, a herald must announce her arrival. When he does, he'll wear a special habit, clothes with the emblem of the Pumpkin Court on them."

"Is that the emblem?" she asked eagerly, pointing to Buster Bear's jack-o'-lantern sweater. "It doesn't look very royal, but it's got a pumpkin on it."

Pumpkinjumper fainted, plummeting from the windowsill into the bushes beneath Mandy Mae's window.

By the time Mandy Mae had put on her jacket, slipped on her slippers, and crept outside to find him, Pumpkinjumper had climbed out of the bushes. He seemed a little unsteady on his feet, so she led him back to the front door and sat him on the steps. "That was quite a fall," she said. "Are you hurt?"

"No," Pumpkinjumper replied, "knights errant are very sturdy. I am a little embarrassed, however; I am afraid I may have overreacted."

"What makes you say that?" Mandy Mae inquired.

"Well," he explained, "I was so surprised to see the token and the emblem that I forgot all about the test." Pumpkinjumper pointed to her slippered feet and shook his head. "It's quite obvious that you're not the Pumpkin Princess."

"And what makes you say that?" she asked, her hands on her hips.

"To prove you are the Pumpkin Princess, you must complete the challenge linked to the knight who discovers you," he shrugged. "I am Pumpkinjumper, the finest jumper of the Pumpkin Court; I must challenge you to a test of pumpkin-jumping. Judging by your tiny feet, you cannot be much of a jumper," he said, spreading his wings apologetically.

"I am in fact a very good jumper," Mandy Mae protested. "I play jump rope and hopscotch and leapfrog, too." She eyed the little crow; the peak of his straw hat barely came up to her waist. "I'll bet I can jump much higher than you."

Pumpkinjumper tilted his head, his black eyes glittering in the moonlight. "If that be the case," he said, "I set before you the Trial of the Three Pumpkins, the very same pumpkins I jumped to earn my knighthood. If you hurdle the third, you will become the Pumpkin Princess. Agreed?" he asked.

"Agreed," she said.

With a flourish and a whirl, Pumpkinjumper threw his straw hat in the air. When it came back down, there was a pumpkin on the front walk. It was scarcely bigger than a baseball, so small it made Mandy Mae laugh. "I won't even have to jump," she told him. "I can just step over it."

"Jump you must," Pumpkinjumper said gravely, "otherwise Pumpkinstepper will be cross with me."

Mandy Mae giggled, kicked off her slippers, and hopped over the pumpkin. She smiled and curtsied to Pumpkinjumper.

"Well done," Pumpkinjumper said, "but the next will not be so easy." So saying, he whirled and turned and threw his hat again; when it came back down a second pumpkin stood beside the first. It was perfectly round and had a broad, squat stem; it looked quite like a basketball. He stepped away and watched Mandy Mae intently.

Mandy Mae sized up the pumpkin, planted her feet, and jumped. She cleared it with no trouble, and Pumpkinjumper clapped for her.

"My goodness, I fear I've underestimated you," he said. "You are a very good jumper indeed, despite your tiny feet." He spat and rubbed his wings together. "It remains to be seen, however, if you are a better jumper than me." Pumpkinjumper whirled and twirled and turned and reeled, hurling his hat so high that Mandy Mae lost sight of it. When it came back down she felt the ground tremble beneath her feet, and a third pumpkin erupted from the soil and rolled to its place beside the second.

Mandy Mae considered the pumpkin carefully from every side. It was not as big as the enormous, prize-winning pumpkins she had seen at the state fair, nor was it even as big as the biggest she had seen at the roadside stand where her mother stopped to buy vegetables. Even so, it was tall enough and wide enough to give her pause. The pumpkin dwarfed Pumpkinjumper, who leaned against it with his wings folded across his chest.

"Having second thoughts?" he teased. "I wouldn't blame you if you decided not to try. I am the finest jumper of the Pumpkin Court, after all, and as you know, the Pumpkin Princess is burdened with all sorts of awful responsibilities. If I were you I think that I would just admit defeat; go back to bed a scaredy-cat with teeny tiny feet."

Mandy Mae pursed her lips and glowered at the little crow. "Just you wait until I'm the Pumpkin Princess," she said. "Then you'll have to pay me the respect I'm due."

Pumpkinjumper bowed deeply. When he rose and spoke again, his voice was low and throaty. "To be sure," he said.

Mandy Mae surveyed the third pumpkin from all sides one last time. She hopped and skipped to warm up her cold feet, taking three practice jumps on the lawn before returning to the walk. She waved Pumpkinjumper aside and stood before the pumpkin, rocking from her heels to her toes, swinging her arms in time with the motion of her feet. At last she took a deep breath, bent her knees, and jumped as high and as far as she could.

Hours later, when the harvest moon began to dip low in the west, Pumpkinjumper turned up the front walk, ambled down the Andersons' driveway, and returned from whence he came.

The people of Poplar Hollow did their best to help the Andersons feel better. They put up flyers and held meetings, offered rewards and pretended to search. In private, however, they lamented their negligence and grieved for the parents of Mandy Mae as soon as word spread about the pumpkins they found on Saturday morning.

The first was quite small, scarcely bigger than a baseball. The second was perfectly round and had a broad, squat stem. The third was rather tall and wide, although its own stem had been snapped in half.

The last pumpkin, the largest of the lot, had been dashed against the pavement. All that remained was a pulpy heap of meat and juice and strings.

By the time the Andersons found it, crows had already picked the seeds clean.❧

back down there was a pumpkin on the front walk.

The Olverung

Traditional wisdom says that one must suffer to create great art.
PERHAPS THE PATH RUNS BOTH WAYS.

BY STEPHEN WOODWORTH ILLUSTRATION BY TONY SHASTEEN

"Four hundred sovereigns." Shivering as he stood among the cemetery's moss-encrusted headstones, Lord Atherton held up his guttering candle and squinted at me, trying to discern some chink of humanity amidst the blackness of my hat and mask and cloak. "A hundred now, and three when I get the Olverung."

I merely looked down at him with my mask of black silk, which shrouded my visage like a headsman's hood. I've found such silence more conducive to my negotiations than a lot of senseless dickering.

"Well?" Pearls of perspiration began to roll from underneath the old man's wig as he grew unnerved with the stillness of my figure and the melancholy of the moonlit churchyard that I had selected for our rendezvous. By design, I limited his Lordship's light to the solitary candle, which he clutched in his hand like a rosary. "Five hundred, then! Or six! For God's sake, name your price!"

"How do you know the King even possesses this mythical bird?" I leaned toward him 'til my veiled face loomed inches from his own. "How do I know you're not merely enticing me to put my neck in His Majesty's noose?"

"Because I've seen it." His face took on a desperate, defeated look. "Because I've heard it. The King—he displays it for the diversion of the nobles, holds parties and forces it to perform like some ha'penny minstrel! Squandering its beauty ..." He shut his eyes, sealed in a rapture of sorrow.

I knew then that he spoke the truth.

"I accept your commission," I announced, "for a thousand sovereigns. Leave half the gold in the hollow tree outside the gate. I shall collect the rest in person when I deliver your prize."

I extinguished the candle's flame with my gloved fingers. The old man cried out at the sudden darkness as I ran through the cemetery in the moonlight. I climbed over the churchyard's low stone wall and onto Obsidian, my steed, and rode off at a trot. Glancing over my shoulder, I could see the bobbing lantern of Atherton's coachman, who sought his master among the graves.

The Olverung is an ugly bird. Its bulbous head juts from the spout of a scrawny neck, and warts dot the bridge of its fat beak. When it struts upon the ground, its pot-bellied body waddles with the ludicrous gait of a town drunkard. Its plumage has the black iridescence of a fly's abdomen and is too coarse even for pillow stuffing. Yet the fowl possesses one singular attribute that princes and popes have coveted for centuries, and it was for this sole virtue that Lord Atherton entreated me to steal the creature from the King.

Atherton knew me strictly by reputation, of course, when he sought my services. Intrigued with the novelty of the theft, I arranged the meeting with his Lordship through my informants. The following morning, I collected my

bounty from the hollow oak, once I assured myself that none of His Majesty's musketeers were watching. In truth, the money meant little to me; I would have accepted Atherton's challenge for a farthing. Ennui has always been my personal curse, you see, constantly goading me into performing ever-greater acts of mischief to satisfy my insatiable longing for sensation.

I conceived a plan for the crime, and two days later, I journeyed to London to seek a man I had not seen—and had not wished to see—since I was a lad of nine.

I found one of his apprentices in the market at Newgate. A small, dirty-faced boy in shabby clothes, he stood amidst a small circle of housemaids with their shopping baskets and produced a seemingly endless string of colored handkerchiefs from his tiny, closed fist. The women giggled at the trick, and tossed a few coppers in the upturned cap that lay at the boy's feet. He bowed and thanked them, and I remembered how I had once performed the same trick, the same bow, hour after hour, day after day.

"You're quite the conjurer," I told the boy as I approached him.

He bowed again. "Thank you, sir!"

Squatting until we were eye-level, I produced a silver half crown and held it up before his widening eyes. "I might have need of a talented magician such as yourself ..."

"I'll take that!" A gnarled hand with long, yellowing nails plucked the coin from my fingers. I glanced up to see my former mentor, wizened by the years and now completely bald. "I'm the boy's father," the man claimed.

"Then I must be his mother," I retorted, drawing myself up to my full height. "I guessed that you would be somewhere nearby, Adolphus."

His eyes narrowed. "Pardon me, sir ... have we met before?"

I smiled coldly. "Don't tell me you've forgotten your favorite protégé."

He scrutinized my features, and his lips stretched into a wicked grin. "Ha-ha! My wayward fowl finally comes home to roost!" A gust of gin-sodden breath blew from his mouth as he cackled.

"Hardly." I waved the offensive air away from my nose. "I do, however, have a business proposition to discuss with you."

"And what would you be needing me for? Seems like you've done quite well for yourself." He eyed the richness of my coat.

"I don't need you. I need the Seven White Ladies."

"Always one for the Ladies!" He gave another rasping laugh. "Come on, then. And have your purse ready."

As I turned to follow him, I placed one of Atherton's gold sovereigns in my open hand and held it behind my back, out of Adolphus's view. Small fingers scraped my palm, and the coin disappeared. I heard the young apprentice scamper away into the crowd, and hoped he had the good sense not to come back.

Adolphus led me through a labyrinth of narrow, sewage-scented streets to the dismal residence of brick where he dwelled, its façade still blackened with soot from the Great Fire. "I see that you haven't lost your taste for luxury," I commented, as we entered his Spartan room. A rat trundled across the floorboards in front of us.

"Better than the common room at the lodging house." He kicked at the rat, which squealed and scurried under the chamber's sole bed.

The room might have been the twin of the one I'd once shared with him. In one corner lay a rolled-up mat and a wooden bowl—most likely the same items that served me when I was his apprentice. On one side of the bed sat a half-filled chamber-pot; on the other side, a rack with a row of pegs had been mounted to the wall. A threadbare surcoat and a pair of knee-breeches hung from the first two pegs, while a willow switch dangled from the third. I grimaced, for the old scars on my shoulders still stung with the memory of that switch.

That's not it! The willow stick stropped my back. A blind man would have seen you palm that coin! Now do it again! Another lash. Again!

I glared at Adolphus. "You still find that orphans make the best magicians?"

"They make the best money." He moved among the room's only other furnishings, an assortment of dust-shrouded magical apparatuses, including a cabinet shaped like a coffin, a box pierced by crossed swords, and impressive reproductions of a headsman's block and axe. "As I recall, you wanted my Seven White Ladies. Sadly, all the damsels are deceased. Allow me to introduce the Seven Gray Gentlemen." He shoved an oblong wicker chest toward me, from which emanated the sound of cooing and fluttering.

"Doves?"

"Pigeons. Bloody stupid birds. But they'll do as I've taught 'em. Now then ..." He patted the chest and smiled. "What are they worth to you?"

After haggling at length, we finally settled the matter for twenty pounds, for which I purchased several of his other tricks as well. Though I would have paid five times what I offered, I feigned reluctance at agreeing to such a price. If Adolphus got wind of how valuable his birds were to me, he would have demanded a share of the spoils from my scheme. Even as he counted out the gold I gave him, he regarded me with suspicion. "I'm surprised you still have an interest in the Art. Tell me, how do you intend to use my Gentlemen?"

"For my own amusement," I answered truthfully, lifting the lid of the wicker chest to peer inside. One of the Gentlemen flapped from the cooing congregation of his kinsmen and perched on my outstretched hand, inspecting me with eyes of ebony.

Given time, I could have trained my own birds and saved myself the expense and irritation of dealing with Adolphus. Atherton informed me, however, that the King intended to show the Olverung at a party within a matter of days, which left me little opportunity to educate a flock of fowls in the Art of Illusion. The Seven Gray Gentlemen would have to do.

Even with the aid of these feathery accomplices, I barely had time to prepare myself for the festivities at the Palace. I had not practiced magic in many years and needed to rehearse the tricks for my performance. Fortunately, deception and knavery are skills common to both magicians and thieves. Small wonder, then, that Adolphus's training had served me so well in my later career.

Early on the morning of His Majesty's party, I loaded a horse cart with my props and illusions and hitched a swift gelding from my stables to the wagon, then set out on the road to London.

When I reached the outskirts of the capital, I paused briefly to don my costume for the evening's performance—a peaked cap, white silk stockings and dark breeches, and a surcoat of motley colors. The coat could be turned wrong side out to display a more somber hue, should I wish to change my demeanor later in the evening. I then powdered my face with flour, blackened my eyebrows with charcoal, and rouged my lips and cheeks.

The sun hung low in the west as I finally arrived at Whitehall Palace, where I joined a line of wagons bearing food and wine for the evening's festivities. One of the King's Life Guards grinned at me as he approached my cart. "Well, aren't you the pretty Fool?" He called over to a fellow member of his regiment. "'ere, Tom! We've got Master 'arlequin 'imself as a guest tonight."

"Don't remember anyone saying anything 'bout a clown," his jowly comrade replied.

"Nor do I. What would be your business with 'is Majesty, Master 'arlequin?"

"The name's Monsieur Renard, magician extraordinaire." I quickly made one, then two, then three balls appear between the fingers of my right hand. "I come to entertain the King, courtesy of Lady Castlemaine." From one of my informants, I'd heard that His Majesty's favorite mistress had gone to take the waters in Bath and would not be in attendance that evening.

After a brief consultation between themselves, the two Guards bid me wait while they sent a lackey to fetch the steward of the King's household. The messenger returned with a small, stooped man, who berated both the lackey and the guards for wasting his time with such trivialities.

"You there!" The steward tilted his nose up to glare at me through his spectacles. "We didn't ask for any clowns. Be on your way!"

"As you wish, sir." I doffed my cap. "I've been paid, either way. But her ladyship will be terribly disappointed that you turned away her gift to His Majesty."

I moved as if to maneuver the cart back toward the lane, but the steward called for me to stop. "Oh, very well!" he muttered. "I suppose you can do your tricks after Moll Davis sings ..."

"How very gracious of you, sir!" I smiled and tipped my cap to him again as I steered the cart into the Tilt Yard across from the Palace.

The evening's festivities were due to take place in the Banqueting House, a grand hall two stories high lined with two tiers of Greek demi-columns. A long-faced footman named Bell helped me tote my magical apparatus into the enormous chamber, where servants were already lighting the candles on the chandeliers and arranging the tables and chairs for the feast. On the ceiling high above us, sumptuous paintings by Rubens depicted the glory of the Stuart monarchs, with Heaven itself welcoming King James into its airy dominion—this, in the same room where Charles I spent his final hours before stepping onto Cromwell's scaffold. Rich tapestries hung the length of the rectangular hall, blocking the view from the downstairs windows.

"I understand the King has some special entertainment planned for this evening," I remarked to Bell as we carried a folding wooden screen into the hall.

"Could be," the footman said, his face expressionless.

"I've heard it's something of a prodigy."

"Could be."

"Would it be possible for a curious soul to have a closer look at it?"

Bell's eyes shifted to meet mine. "Could be."

Further questioning revealed that it "could be" possible for twelve guineas.

A group of musicians sat at one end of the hall, readying their instruments, and I arranged my apparatus, including a perch for my birds, beside them. Bell and I unfolded the wooden screen to serve as a curtain for my entrance and exit. Disguised by the arcane runes painted on the screen's wooden panels, a pair of eyeholes gave me a reasonable view of the chamber at large. I set Adolphus's wicker chest behind the screen and sat on it, eating some bread and cheese I'd brought with me and drinking a small mug of ale that Bell brought from the kitchen. My meal finished, I opened the chest and gently placed each of the Gray Gentlemen in one of the seven drawstring bags concealed in my costume.

Before long, a pair of servants opened the doors at the upper end of the chamber and stood aside to allow a procession of nobles to file in by twos and threes, the men dressed in embroidered vests and tunics, the women in satin gowns. Lord Atherton, I noticed, entered alone, silent and pensive. I watched the parade of aristocrats with indifference—until I saw the Lady Barbara Castlemaine, sometime lover of the King and the woman I'd falsely claimed as my patroness, step into the room.

Even without its layer of flour, my face would have blanched at that instant. She wouldn't dare to speak to the King at such a public function, not with the Queen in attendance, I told myself. Nevertheless, my eyes instinctively scanned the room for avenues of escape. I also vowed that I would soon have words with Toby Tulliver, the reprobate who'd earned five crowns by telling me her ladyship had gone to Bath.

The assembled company took their places at table, yet remained standing as a herald announced the arrival of the King and Queen. The monarchs ascended to an elevated table at the head of the room, Charles smiling and at ease, Catherine somber and stiff. The tall heels of the King's shoes elevated him in stature above his wife, and his wig seemed longer, darker, and curlier than that of any other man in the room, its coal color matching his neatly trimmed black mustache. The monarchs seated themselves on adjacent thrones as the guests cheered their appearance. His Majesty acknowledged their applause and bade them sit down, and servants in satin livery filed in bearing lavish foods on plates of gold.

For some time, the company dined on fricassee of rabbit, boiled mutton, haunch of venison, and other such extravagances, but His Majesty insisted that all dining cease as Mary Davis stepped up to perform. Commonly called "Moll" Davis for her reputation as a libertine, the actress had caught the King's eye with her rendition of "My Lodging Is on the Cold Ground" in *The Rivals,* a ballad she now sang with the accompaniment of the musicians seated beside me. The Queen, a plain, swarthy Portuguese, frowned at the attention His Majesty paid to the pale, buxom singer.

The nobles in the audience, of course, all knew of Moll Davis's liaisons with the King, and they responded to her pleasant ditties with polite applause. As soon as she had finished her recital, the servants brought in a selection of pies, cakes, and puddings, and refilled the company's goblets with spiced wines and beers.

It was then, in the midst of this clamor of clattering plates and cups, that the irascible steward introduced me to the audience. "My lords and ladies," he brusquely announced, "as a token of friendship, one of His Majesty's many ... admirers has sent us a splendid magician for our amusement this evening. I give you—Monsieur Renard!"

I exhaled my pent-up breath and silently thanked the good steward for his discretion in withholding Lady Castlemaine's name. Before he could leave the floor, I bounded out from behind the screen and shook his hand with comic vigor. This gesture won the first chuckle from my audience of nobility.

I peered at the steward as if perplexed. "Did you have squab for dinner tonight, sir?"

The little man grew flustered. "What on—no, I did not have squab!"

"Then what, pray tell, is this?" I reached under the flap of his surcoat and produced the first of the Seven Gray Gentlemen. With a gentle nudge from my hand, the pigeon flew up and alighted on the steward's head. The audience roared with laughter as he frantically shooed the bird off his scalp and hurried off the floor.

"Evidently, squab does not agree with our friend. A pity, because I have enough here for a feast!" Striding out into the crowd of seated nobles, I made the other pigeons appear in rapid succession, producing them from under handkerchiefs, from behind earls' heads, and from under women's skirts. I released each bird in turn, and it flew across the chamber to roost with its companions on the perch I had prepared for them.

At last, all the birds sat cooing in a row. "My lords and ladies, may I present my mentors in magic—the Seven Gray Gentlemen!" I said with a grand sweep of my arm, and bowed as the audience applauded.

I proceeded to regale them with parlor tricks and patter. I even placed Adolphus's rune-covered box on the head of the Duke of Albemarle, and then made it appear that I pierced his skull with crossed swords. "Fear not, good people!" I assured his fellow peers. "The noble Duke has no brains to damage."

The assembly roared again and applauded. "What a perfect rogue

Inside the case, two rows of silver thimbles nestled in contoured crevices of velvet. A long, thin spine of metal extended from the head of each thimble, and the point of each spine ended in some form of hook, needle, or razor.

the fellow is!" the King murmured, little suspecting he spoke the truth.

While the chamber of nobles cheered, I gave a final, deep bow and carried the perch bearing the Seven Gray Gentlemen behind the screen with me as I made my exit. I put six of the pigeons back in the wicker chest and placed one in a drawstring bag beneath my surcoat. Peering through the screen's hidden eyeholes, I could see the sullen steward sheepishly step forward.

"My lords and ladies," he implored, "we beseech your patience as we prepare for the evening's final performance."

The audience quieted as servants carried in an upholstered bench and a marble-topped table and arranged them at the near end of the room. On the table, they set a red velvet pillow from which dangled several white ribbons. A moment later, a white-gloved footman entered with a brass stand surmounted by a domed cage. As the footman set the stand beside the table, a hidden fluttering stirred the embroidered linen draped over the cage.

The steward cleared his throat. "Signor Salveri, if you would be so kind ..."

A corpulent man with lowering brows rose from the ensemble of musicians beside me and stepped forward, a black valise in his hands. He bowed to the King, the Queen, and the court, acknowledging their applause. The buttons of his waistcoat strained at their bonds as he seated himself on the bench before the table with the velvet cushion. He nodded to the waiting footman, then opened his valise.

Inside the case, two rows of silver thimbles nestled in contoured crevices of velvet. A long thin spine of metal extended from the head of each thimble, and the point of each spine ended in some form of hook, needle, or razor. Signor Salveri held up his hands, and servants placed the implements on the tips of his fingers and thumbs.

Meanwhile, the footman folded back the linen shroud on the cage and reached inside to grasp the unseen captive. The servant's hands girdling its squat body, the bird swiveled its ungainly head in panic as it emerged, its iridescent black wings flapping impotently.

The Olverung was every bit as ill-formed as its legend had promised.

With some difficulty, the footman turned the bird on its back and held it fast to the pillow, its wings splayed, while his fellow servants bound the animal with the white ribbons.

Signor Salveri set to work on its belly with his instruments, and the first notes of the Olverung's song burst forth.

A wavering, ethereal vibration rose from the creature's throat, such as the sound made when one rubs the rim of a fine crystal goblet with wet fingers. It swelled in volume until the very windows of the Banqueting House hummed in sympathy. Salveri plucked at the animal's flesh as though playing a harp, artfully increasing the creature's pain to elicit a crescendo of poignancy from its cries. Such is the bird's nature: A dull, chittering fowl when content, it only unleashes the mystical beauty of its voice in the throes of agony.

The melody trembled between major and minor keys, angelic and anguished all at once. First ringing one's head with dizzying ecstasy, then clamping it in the vise of unbearable grief. It promised delight beyond measure, yet, an instant later, dashed all hope of happiness.

It was the sound of Love.

Men and women alike sobbed openly. The Queen let out a strangled cry and buried her face in her hands. The King dabbed daintily at his eyes with a handkerchief. Some wept for joy, some wept for sorrow, but all wept for Love.

Even I was not immune. I, who have known neither a mother's tenderness nor a friend's loyalty in my wretched existence. I, who have never wooed a woman for more than a night's dalliance. A stranger to Love, I recognized its voice as surely as if seeing my own twin for the first time: terrible and glorious, beautiful and cruel, eternal yet fleeting.

My ice-bound heart shivered to the point of shattering, and tears turned the flour on my cheeks into trails of paste.

Signor Salveri concluded his concerto, and the Olverung's final notes faded in its throat. A reverent hush hung over the room for several moments, punctuated only by small cries. Scattered clapping soon swelled into a rousing ovation as Salveri stood and bowed to the court, while the white-gloved footman untied the Olverung and placed the unconscious bird back in its cage. The footman carried the cage out of the hall as his fellow servants entered with more wine for the nobles, who jabbered amongst themselves.

Seated behind the screen, I barely had time to blot the moisture from my cheeks before I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to find Bell regarding me with the same emotionless expression he'd worn that afternoon. He nodded toward a door on our right, and I followed him out of the Banqueting House into a passageway that connected the hall to the royal apartments. Carrying a pair of mounted candles to light our way, he led me down the corridor and up a flight of stairs.

When we reached the second-floor landing, he motioned for me to stop, then leaned around a corner to peer down another hallway. After a moment, he waved me forward and handed me one of his candles. "Third door on the right. What you do there is your own affair."

I nodded, and placed a bag of guineas in his upturned palm.

Bell hurried off down the stairs as I advanced to the indicated door and entered the King's private library. Although I encountered no one in the darkened hallway, I knew that the King's party might disperse at any moment, allowing the servants and Guards to return to their stations throughout the household.

The library was a rectangular room so large that my candle's meager flame could not illuminate the far end of the chamber. Cabinets burdened with leather-bound tomes ran the length of one wall, while a long window in the opposing wall offered a view of the moonlit waters of the Thames. As I moved about the room, the circle of light from my candle swept over furnishings of polished walnut and mahogany, a brass telescope, a globe of the heavens. Finally, I found the brass stand with its linen-draped cage in a far corner of the chamber.

Setting my candle on a nearby table, I lifted the linen veil and opened the cage door. The Olverung lay on the floor of the cage with its eyes shut, exhausted by the attentions of Signor Salveri. I gingerly scooped the dormant bird into my hand and slid it into one of my drawstring bags. Somewhat larger than a pigeon, it made for a tight fit.

Even I was not immune. I, who have known neither a mother's tenderness nor a friend's loyalty in my wretched existence. I, who have never wooed a woman for more than a night's dalliance.

I then replaced the rare fowl with the Gray Gent I carried. With any luck, the flutter of wings beneath the cage's cover would prevent the theft from being discovered for hours to come.

The Olverung snug in the bag beneath my surcoat, I hastened back to the Banqueting House. The western face of the Palace bordered the Thames, and, as I did not have a boat waiting for me at the river, I would have to exit Whitehall on the eastern side, the way I'd come in.

No sooner had I rejoined the soiree in the great hall than the officious steward bustled up to me, shaking his finger. "There you are! Come with me—His Majesty wishes to speak with you."

My heart quickened, and the weight of the bag beneath my coat seemed heavier than before. Resisting the urge to flee, I gave an ingratiating smile. "It would be an honor."

The steward guided me up to the head of the room, where the King stood conversing with the Duke of Albemarle, the Earl of Southampton ... and the Lady Barbara Castlemaine. The Queen had evidently retired early that evening.

His Majesty grinned as I approached. "Ah! Here is the knave himself! Delightful show, my good fellow."

I bowed. "Your Highness is too kind."

The King gestured magnanimously with his hand. "Pray, sirrah, favor us with more of your splendid tricks."

A tremor of apprehension ran through me. Out of the corners of my eyes, I could see the Guards who stood in vigilance a few yards to either side of us.

"I am a sorcerer!" I objected with mock indignation. "I would never dare to trick Your Highness. Tricks are for scoundrels. Take this fellow here—" I stepped up to the Earl of Southampton and pretended to pull a sovereign from his ear. "—he has obviously been plundering Your Majesty's Treasury!"

The King, the Earl, and the Duke burst into laughter, while Lady Castlemaine tittered demurely with one gloved hand held over her mouth. My anxiety eased.

As it turned out, my own cleverness proved my undoing: Each trifle I performed only served to whet the King's appetite for more. "Another! Another!" he urged after each illusion, obliging me to continue my improvisations.

Beneath my coat, I felt the Olverung stir within its drawstring bag.

Sweat matted the flour on my forehead as I made the Earl's snuffbox vanish from my hand, then produced it from a pocket on the Duke's waistcoat. "I thank you, my lords." I bowed again as they applauded. "Sadly, I must now take my leave—"

"Surely not!" the King insisted with boyish petulance. "One more, please."

The drawstring bag throbbed as though it were an egg about to hatch. I bowed once more and disguised my impatience with false modesty. "Your Highness taxes my humble skills ..."

"Nonsense! Another, please."

"Your Majesty," a familiar voice interrupted from behind me, "shouldn't we take this opportunity to discuss the Dutch situation?"

The King sighed. "Honestly, Atherton, do you think about nothing but business?"

I smiled inwardly. His lordship must have deduced my identity and stepped forward to aid my escape. Although Atherton and I avoided looking one another in the eye, I could have kissed his sour old face right then.

"I leave for Paris on the morrow, Your Highness," he said sternly. "King Louis will want to know our position."

"Yes, but can it not wait another half of an hour?" the King muttered.

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, I am an old man with a long journey ahead of me. I must to bed."

The King sighed and turned to me. "Monsieur Renard, it seems we have some duties to attend to. However, we insist that you return to entertain us again."

"Of course, Your Majesty," I lied. "At your pleasure." As court etiquette dictated, I genuflected and moved to leave, cautious not to turn my back on the King until I was a discreet distance away.

"What a charming clown!" I heard Lady Castlemaine purr. "Wherever did you find him?"

The steward, who remained standing in attendance at the King's elbow, cleared his throat. "M'lady, the magician claims that you employed him this evening."

She laughed. "Surely another of his jests! I've never seen him before in my life ..."

I did not wait for the steward's reply. Quickening my steps, I returned to the other end of the hall. To avoid arousing further suspicion, I resolved to carry the wicker chest as I made my exit, even though I no longer needed it. Once I had the chest outside, I could secretly replace the remaining Gray Gentlemen with the Olverung, thereby removing the twitching bird from my person.

In my haste, alas, I lifted the chest with such force that it crushed the hidden drawstring bag against my side.

Roused by the pain, the Olverung began to sing.

Within moments, everyone in the Banqueting House, from the King down to the lowliest servant, fell silent in astonishment. Muffled yet unmistakable, the plaintive melody grew louder in the chamber's sudden stillness. For an instant, the company remained perplexed, unable to comprehend what they heard.

Then the steward's eyes gaped with the realization. "He has the Olverung! Guards!"

Answering the call, two Guards rushed toward me from the door to my right. "The bird! Get the bird!" the steward shrieked at them.

Both soldiers aimed their muskets at me. "Very well," I said. "You may have the bird."

I dropped the wicker chest on the floor, jerking the lid open as I did so. The six remaining Gray Gentlemen flapped out into the Banqueting House.

Afraid that the bird he was supposed to retrieve was about to fly away, one of the Guards threw down his gun and attempted to snatch the Gentlemen as they fluttered around him. The other still pointed his musket at me, but before he could pull the trigger, his bird-chasing comrade stumbled in front of him.

I drew a sword from Adolphus's rune-covered box illusion and dashed toward one of the hanging tapestries on my left. Guards from every quarter of the hall converged on me, their progress slowed by the crowd of murmuring aristocrats, all of whom were too stunned or fearful to move. A few of the soldiers stopped and raised the barrels of their guns.

The steward raised his hands in protest. "Don't shoot, you fools! You might damage the fowl!"

As the Guards hesitated, I thrust aside one corner of the tapestry and climbed onto the deep ledge of the window behind the arras. Just before he disappeared from my view, I thought I saw the King laugh.

I had given His Majesty one final trick after all.

Once hidden behind the tapestry, I turned the window latch and thrust open one of the casements, then leapt out onto the cobblestone pathway that threaded between the Banqueting House and the Palace's bakery and scalding house.

Shouts of alarm rose over the Palace grounds as I ran to the Tilt Yard, where my horse and cart sat waiting at the far end of a long line of coaches and sedan chairs belonging to the King's guests. Lanterns drifted through the darkness as stable boys and coachmen moved among the carriages, tending the horses. Startled by my appearance, they did not stop me as I clambered onto the cart and used Adolphus's sword to slash the harness that tethered the gelding to the wagon. With the Olverung still keening its ethereal elegy, I cast aside the sword, leapt onto the gelding's back, and charged out of the yard at a gallop.

Before I'd even reached Charing Cross, I could hear hoofbeats clattering up on me from behind. Casting off my peaked cap, I spurred my horse on to Haymarket, haphazardly turning right and left amongst nearly deserted streets of darkened shops. When I'd lost my pursuers for the nonce, I reared the gelding to a halt, swung myself off the animal, then swatted its flank to send it on up the avenue.

As the riderless horse galloped away, I hastily turned my surcoat wrong side out, exchanging the motley colors for a black that matched the night around me. Striding toward the darkness of an adjacent alley, I opened the top of the drawstring bag just enough to allow the Olverung to stick its misshapen head into the chill evening air. At any other time, I would have sold my soul to hear the melody that continued to pour from its throat; at that moment, however, I only wanted the bird to shut its wart-spotted beak.

"Hush ... hush," I whispered, and stroked its bristling feathers as tenderly as I could. "I won't let them have you."

The melody dwindled to a wistful whistling. As the Olverung calmed beneath my touch, it began to coo quietly.

Wiping the remaining flour off my face with my sleeve, I cradled the bird close to my chest as I crouched in the cover of the alley's shadows. Not more than a minute later, I saw two of the King's Guards ride past on horseback, vainly hunting a fugitive Harlequin.

Continued on page 90

Here There Be Giants

Professor Ari Berk sets off on a new adventure to study fantastic creatures of folklore and myth, beginning with GIANTS!

– By Mia Nutick –

Fantasy is often perceived to be the exclusive realm of the imagination, with little regard for scholarship. It only takes a look at the work of J.R.R. Tolkien or Ursula LeGuin to realize that knowledge and fantasy are not mutually exclusive, and indeed, often the best fantasy works are also the best researched fantasy works.

In 1977, Harry N. Abrams published a book written by Will Huygen and illustrated by Rien Poortvliet: *Gnomes*. An instant classic, this book loosely modeled on medieval bestiaries mixed with modern journalism was the first great book to give readers a "factual" glimpse into the world of fantastic beings. In 1978, Brian Froud and Alan Lee brought us *Faeries*, another look into the mythic world, and the concept of investigative or expository fantasy works in the tradition of the travelogue reporting of Prester John became a delightful new genre in fantasy fiction.

Under the auspices of Templar Publishing, investigative fantasy books for children have experienced renewed popularity. Their "Ology" books (*Dragonology, Pirateology, Egyptology, Wizardology, Mythology,* and *Monsterology*), along with an interactive website, take young readers on a learning adventure geared toward the fantastic, combining education with imagination in an exciting way. Their newest series, *The Secret Histories,* continues in the earlier tradition of *Gnomes* with a journalistic look at specific species of fantastic creatures.

The first book in the series, *The Secret History of Giants,* was written by Dr. Ari Berk. Dr. Berk is without a doubt a true scholar, holding a Ph.D. and teaching Mythology, Folklore, and American Indian Literature at Central Michigan University. He is well known for his other studious looks at the Fey Folk with artist Brian Froud: *The Runes of Elfland* (Harry N. Abrams, 2003), *Goblins* (Harry N. Abrams, 2004), and *Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy Letters* (Harry N. Abrams, 2005). And he is an expert at combining research with imagination to create wonderful and amazing literary works.

Giants is a gorgeous volume; if children had coffee tables, this could be their coffee table book. Boasting a thick, beautifully illustrated cover embossed with brass leaf, printed on thick doubled cardstock-weight paper, it comes in at a short 48 pages—if you don't count the numerous foldouts and delightful tiny books-within-the-book that open to tell separate stories as addition to the main text. A book that will delight readers aged 48 as easily as the target readers of age 8, *Giants* is absolutely packed with whimsically presented bits of fascinating information.

- ORDULPH OF TAVISTOCK -

Larry MacDougall

When asked how much of the book was based on actual myth and how much was pure invention, Berk responded, "Nearly everything in the book is based, in some way, on actual folklore and/or literary/legendary/historical reference. Just an example: even the billing statement sent by the giants to the Druids for the construction of Stonehenge contains some little references to medieval folklore, such as the name of the site where the stones came from. In this way, I wanted the book to be something that was the beginning of other reading adventures ... you read this book, and start exploring the names and places and things the book refers to, and suddenly you see that the world you thought you knew is awash with wonder."

Dr. Berk, stated in the book to be a member of the Order of the Golden Quills (other members include such noted figures as Alexander of Macedon, Taliesin, [Lady] Murazaki, and Shakespeare), succeeds wholly in enticing the reader to learn more about the subject through his introduction of interesting tidbits of fact mixed in with the fantasy. It is easy to believe that Stonehenge and other henges were placed by giants for purposes of their own, and yet surely this will inspire children to learn more about the nature of the great stone circles through other readings. Exploration of various races of giants describes the elves' fear of the race of Cyclopes (who refer to elves as "little green crunchies")—this tantalizing information is almost

MYSTERIES OF THE GIANT SACK

Wayne Anderson

Giant Downfall

Gary Chalk

Roc

Wayne Anderson

> *"My hope in writing The Secret Histories, and Giants in particular, is that the reader finish the book and look at the world with a renewed sense of wonder."*

Celtic Giant

Douglas Carrel

guaranteed to lead young readers into the vast world of Greek mythology for more Cyclopean tales. Vignettes of Yspaddaden and Balor lead back to the Celtic myths, and tales of Ymir, Thiazi, and other Norse giants will awaken young readers to a world where giants are common among the gods. Korean giants, South American giants, North American Indian giants—the book is literally a stepping-off place into nearly any mythology one can imagine.

By no means does Dr. Berk abandon fancy entirely, of course. Among the tiny inclusions readers will find a book of giant cookery (sample recipe: "1. Take twelve sheep. 2. Put in mouth. 3. Enjoy! 4. Repeat steps as desired."), a bill for the construction of Stonehenge, a Zoologica Giganticum describing other giant beasts, and the tale of Jack the Giant-Killer from the point of view of the poor giant's widow.

Ari Berk has a history of collaboration with good illustrators. To say that this book is lushly illustrated would be an understatement; Berk, editor Ruth Martin, and Templar worked with no less than five illustrators to bring the stories and information in the book to life: Wayne Anderson (*The Flight of Dragons, Moon Dog*), Douglas Carrel (*Dragonology*), Gary Chalk (*Lone Wolf, Redwall*), Kevin Levell (*The Adventures of Taormina*) and Larry MacDougall (White Wolf Games: *Mage, The Witching Hour*). While working with five different artists could have been disastrous for the cohesiveness of the illustrations, this volume

GOG AND MAGOG STAND GUARD AT THE HALL OF GIANTS

Gary Chalk

> *"Of all the Secret Folk, giants really leave their mark. Mountains, valleys, rock, and stone, their signatures are writ large on the land."*

is so well coordinated that it is difficult to pick out one illustrator over another. Each contributes beautiful and highly detailed drawings that maintain the same sense of "drawing from life" throughout the work.

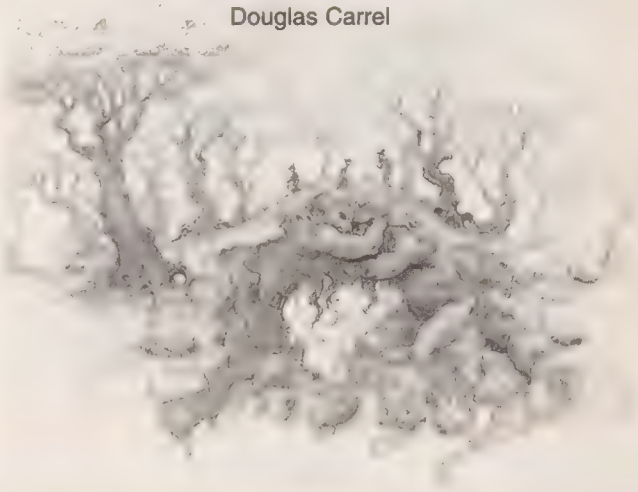
How did they accomplish this? "This," Ari Berk explains, "is largely due to the incredible talents of the art department at Templar (which is the originating publisher, even though the book is published in the U.S. by Candlewick). They choose the artists, for the most part (though I often have some input here) and then I write briefs for each of the spreads for the kinds of images needed and how I'd like them to be done. That being said, I try to leave as much room as possible for the artists to interpret things their own way. This often leads to some wonderful images that I could never have imagined on my own.

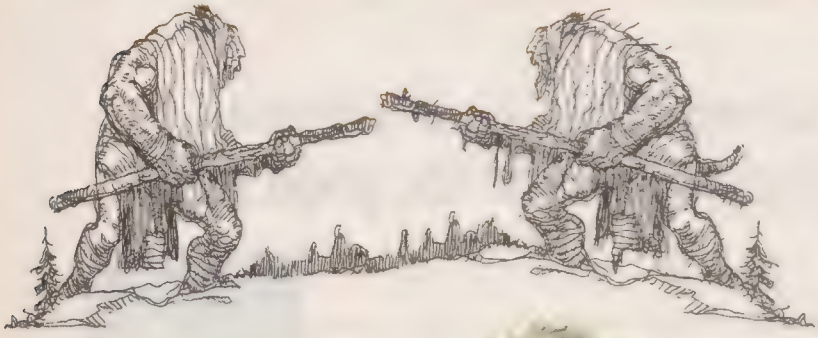
"Also, some artists have strengths in certain areas [fine ink work, for example] and we try to play to those strengths when assigning art for specific spreads. But as for the balance of the book visually, I have to thank Will Steele who art directs them."

Undoubtedly the illustrations as well as the text will lead children not only to explore other areas of myth and legend, but to look at the world around them with new wonder. Stone circles placed by giants are not the only earthworks illustrated; Berk explains the little-known fact that giants return to the earth at their "earthfasting," and many mountains, outcroppings, and other features of the landscape are actually the bodies of giants who have once again become part of the planet. In the giant's creation myth related in the book by the giant Ainar Rocktongue the Elder, the giants say "...striding far, but never forgetting our

HIDDEN GIANTS

Douglas Carrel





SPECIES OF GIANTS

Larry MacDougall

STAVESPAR

Larry MacDougall

roots, our fathers and mothers of earthfast rock. And at our long days' ending, we shall return to them: to the mountains, to the tors, to the earthlight." The team of illustrators provides beautiful examples of giants as part of the scenery, and adults as well as children who read this volume will enjoy scouting out natural wonders that might, just might, really be long-sleeping giants.

Like the "Ology" books, Templar plans for the *Secret Histories* to be an ongoing series. Of the series, Berk says, "My hope in writing *The Secret Histories,* and *Giants* in particular, is that the reader will finish the book and look at the world with a renewed sense of wonder. Recently, on a book tour for *Giants* in England and Ireland, a student asked me why I like Giants so much. I said it was because of all the Secret Folk, giants really leave their mark. Mountains, valleys, rock, and stone, their signatures are writ large on the land. Such places, and the stories about them, make me wonder what kind of signature we (as humans) are leaving behind. How will we be remembered and for what? Wonder and memory: those are the giants' gifts to us."

Wonder and memory—what better gifts for young readers? As Huygen and Poortvliet did with *Gnomes* more than thirty years ago, so Berk and his team of superb illustrators have created a volume about the Secret Folk that will capture the imaginations of generations of children and their parents. The next volume, also written by Ari Berk, will be *The Secret History of Mermaids and Merfolk,* and like the "Ology" series and *The Secret History of Giants* it will no doubt be another fine example of Dr. Berk's unique mix of scholarship and whimsy. ❧

A GIANT SAVES THE TOWN

Gary Chalk

By Eric T. Baker

Futuristic heroes with—and without—cybernetic implants fight the good fight.

Last issue's column started with a review of *Ninja Gaiden II*, an action game for the Xbox 360 where a legendary swordsman hacked and slashed his way through level after level of enemies. The gameplay was punctuated by gorgeous cut scenes. The control scheme was simple, yet combat was very demanding. Ultimately the story was a little lacking and the players needed really good hand-eye coordination to make it to the end.

This issue's column begins with ***Too Human*** by Silicon Knights from Microsoft Game Studios for the Xbox 360, an action game where the hero isn't just a god-like swordsman; named Baldur, he is in fact a god. With a variety of melee weapons and guns, the player battles him through level after level of robotic enemies. The game play is punctuated with gorgeous cut scenes. The controls are simple and unintuitive all at the same time, but the story is involving and the world-building is creative.

Baldur is one of the gods who rule and protect the human race on the ice world of Too Human. *Of all the gods, he is the least modified with cybernetic implants and thus is "too human."*

The game is set on an ice world. Baldur is one of the Aesir, the gods who rule and protect the human population. Their godhood comes from cybernetic implants; Baldur is the least modified of Odin's children and seen as "too human." The Aesir's main computer is housed in Yggdrasil, named and shaped after the tree of life. Within its cybernetic reality live the Norns, who guide the Aesir and help Balder on his quest to find out why some of the robotic monsters loose on the world have taken to harvesting human blood.

The best news about *TH* is that it isn't nearly as demanding to play as *NGII*. Most of the battles take place in large, flat spaces with limited obstacles. Baldur's best attack is also the easiest to execute. Jerk both joysticks in the same direction and if there is an enemy there, even if it is off screen, Baldur will rocket across the ground and whack it with his sword. When played in co-op mode, the players can choose complementary classes such that one type will specialize in knocking enemies into the air and the other will specialize to doing crits to them while they are there.

There is an RPG element to

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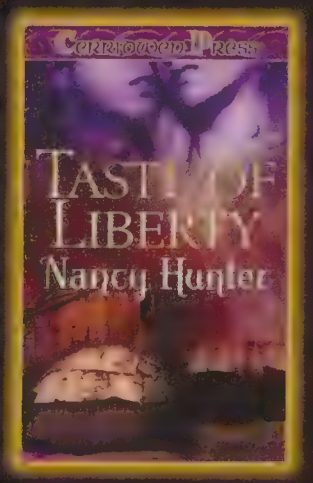

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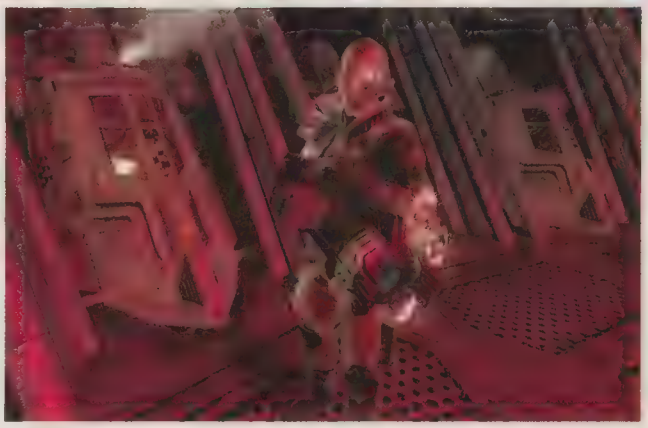
TH in that the player levels Balder up, assigning points to various skills. Enemies drop a multitude of power-ups (called battle cries). equipment and weapons, money, and crafting components. Baldur at the end of the game can be very different from Baldur at the start in equipment and power, but the story itself is linear, told in the cut scenes and chatter of the troopers that accompany the god. Ultimately, *Too Human* is an accessible, playable action game.

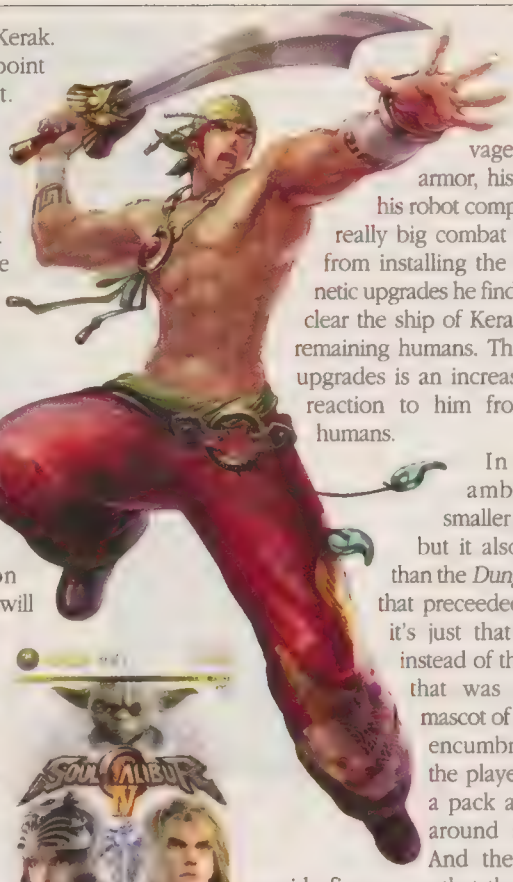
Oddly similar to *TH* in some ways is ***Space Seige*** by Gas Powered Games from Sega for the PC. GPG is the company behind the *Dungeon Seige* games and *SS* plays very much like one of them. Set in the future, humanity is attacked by the alien Kerak. The player takes the role of Seth Walker, a soldier stationed on one of the colony ships that manages to escape the destruction of Earth, but not before the ship is invaded by the many,



many different types of Kerak.

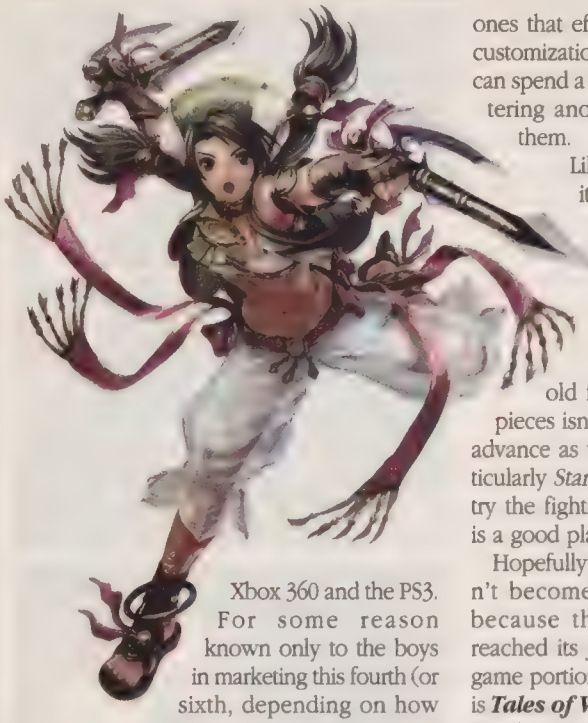
Movement in *SS* is point and click, as is combat. The camera is third person. Point and click on the map with the left button and Seth runs to that spot. Point and click on an enemy with the right button, and Seth will shoot at it with one of his guns or slice it with his energy sword, depending on which he has equipped. Dead enemies drop salvage that can be retrieved all at once by a simple press of the z key. Left clicking on some lockers and crates will also spit out loot, and shooting, by right clicking, the many explosive barrels, tanks, and canisters will set them off.

So while the controls are very different, *SS* is also a game about a future warrior who fights monsters with guns and swords, collects salvage, and worries about how cybernetic he's becoming. Seth can spend his salvage to improve his armor, his weapons, and his robot companions, but the really big combat bonuses come from installing the various cybernetic upgrades he finds as he seeks to clear the ship of Kerak and save the remaining humans. The cost of these upgrades is an increasingly negative reaction to him from those very humans.



In budget and ambition, *SS* is a smaller game than *TH*, but it also feels smaller than the *Dungeon Seige* titles that preceeded it. Or maybe it's just that it has robots instead of the faithful mule that was the unofficial mascot of *DS*. There is no encumbrance in *SS* so the player doesn't need a pack animal to carry around all the drops. And the HR-V robots provide fire power that the mules didn't. The missing mule is just an example of how *SS* is very easy to play, but isn't as engrossing at its predecessors.

Speaking of men with cybernetic implants and energy swords, the next game up is ***Soul Calibur IV*** from Namco Bandai Games for the



Xbox 360 and the PS3. For some reason known only to the boys in marketing this fourth (or sixth, depending on how you count them) installment of the Japanese sword-fighting series contains three characters from the *Star Wars* mythos. The 360 contains Yoda, the PS3 has Darth Vader, and both games have the Apprentice, who is the star of an upcoming Lucas Arts video game.

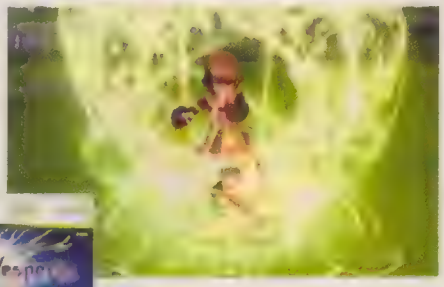
For fans of *Soul Calibur*, the good news is that the *SW* characters don't break the game. For fans of *Star Wars*, the good news is that *SCIV* gives players a chance to put their light saber techniques to a test they've never had before. So the result isn't a blissful marriage, but it is one that gives the players a few more options in play.

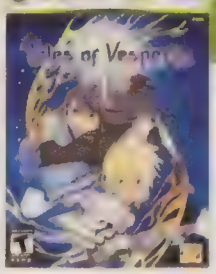
As to the play itself, *SCIV* isn't that much different from the previous incarnations of the game. Players who were doing combos and finishing moves in the previous games will be doing their equivalents in no time at all in *IV*. Also, *SCIV* remains the most forgiving fighting game on the market for new players and for older players with less coordination. Players with any timing at all will be able to hold their own against the computer's easy setting, which will let them advance through the game's various single-player modes.

The biggest change in this version of *SC* is the introduction of online play. There is no team mode, but there are both ranked and unranked matches. Within these two categories players can also chose arcade or special. In special, players can use any of the items and skills they have unlocked in the single-player modes and customized their characters with. In arcade, the characters can still have any of the cosmetic customizations they've made, but none of the ones that effect combat. There are so many customizations possible in *SCIV* that players can spend a long time online without encountering another fighter that looks just like them.

Like all fighting games, *SCIV* is at its best when played with friends ... or people who might become friends. On the couch is better than online, but online is better than against the computer. It is fun to create a unique character or customize an old favorite, but unlocking bits and pieces isn't as much fun without a story to advance as well. That said, for anyone, particularly *Star Wars* fans, looking to try the fighting game genre, *SCIV* is a good place to start.

Hopefully men with swords hasn't become overwhelming yet because the column has just reached its Japanese role playing game portion. The game this issue is ***Tales of Vesperia*** from Namco Bandai Games for the Xbox 360. This is probably the 10th *Tales* game, but it depends on how you count them. And for players who have never tried the series before, it doesn't really matter. *ToV* concerns new characters on new adventures.





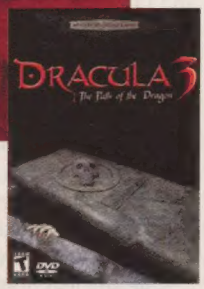
Two things make *Tales* games in general and *ToV* in particular different from other JRPGs. First, its cut scenes and its in-game art are done anime style. For *ToV* the animation was done by Project IG which is famous for its work animating the *Ghost in the Shell* TV series. Second, the combat is active rather than turn-based. The player controls one character, moving it around the battlefield and button mashing normal and special attacks. The computer runs the other characters, but the players can set how they want the AI to fight. Or alternately, up to four players can fight the battles simultaneously, each controlling a character.

Of course, there is more to *ToV* than the animation and the combat, but those are the things that set it apart. In other ways it follows the typical JRPG tracks of a young male protagonist (with a sword!) and his misfit band of friends wandering from adventure to adventure as they uncover injustice and deceit. Of course, in this game one of the misfits is a talking dog who carries the pipe of a former master, so it has to be given points for that.

Finally, swords can be put aside for stakes. It is hard to believe that is has been six years since *Syberia* was released. It is easily one of the best and most stylish point-and-click adventure games created this century. So the bar is pretty high for Microids new game, ***Dracula 3: Path of the Dragon*** for the PC, released by Encore here in America. Luckily for players, *D3:PotD* has the same quality of visuals and cut scenes that *Syberia* did. It also has a compelling plot and challenging puzzles.

The protagonist of *D3:PotD* is not a vampire hunter. He is a Catholic priest, Father Arno Moriani. The year is 1920 and the Father is sent to Transylvania to investigate the nomination of Dr. Martha Calugarul for sainthood. While no one has anything but good say of Calugarul, the Father discovers that she was looking

into a rare blood disorder at the time of her death. The disorder only shows up in corpses, and all the corpses with it have neck injuries. The players see where this is going because they know there are vampires ... at least in this game. It takes the Father a little longer, and by then his investigation is already headed him down "the path of the dragon."



And finally there is the just silly. ***Strongbad's Cool Game for Attractive People Episode 1 Homestar Ruiner*** from Telltale Games for the Wii and PC is also a click-and-point adventure game, but genre and basic mechanics is about all it has in common with *D3:PotD*. Like the *Sam & Maxx* adventures (also from Telltale) or last issue's *Penny Arcade* game, *Strongbad* is not a complete experience, but a short episode made to amuse the player for three or four hours, about twice the time of a movie in a theater at the same price.

As with the PC game, players don't have to be a fan of the *Homestar* site to enjoy the game, but it helps. What helps even more is if the style of humor on that site appeals to you. The PC game had the player fighting clowns with a rake. *Strongbad* has players giving sarcastic answers to e-mails while the characters type in boxing gloves, creating stick figure webcomics of their own, and playing a boxing mini-game that pits the character against snakes. It's silly, but it is also a specific kind of silly that isn't for everyone.

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fragments

Continued from page 67

Faint moonlight peeked through the cracks of shuttered windows, revealing the absence of furniture and life. Even the massive stone fireplace stood empty, as if nothing had burned in its depths for centuries. If a witch had ever lived here, she'd moved on long, long ago. Julia dropped the bag to the floor and fell down beside it. Dust rose in plumes and the floorboards creaked beneath her heaving inhalations.

"So you see? There is nothing for you here."

Julia raised her head and saw Bandy Tam leaning against the far wall. He'd once again taken the form of the handsome man she'd met in the parking lot of the Food King.

"I can't pull you from this place. You've dug yourself in far too deep for that. But you can still choose the path of no pain. You can be whole again. In my world, you can forget for real. We can lock these horrors away forever and throw away the key."

Julia cried. How easy it would be to simply go with this gorgeous man and forget about everything. And yet, that would be another betrayal of her husband and son, worse even than coming here. She'd cast them away, and look what it had taken to get them back. If she weren't meant to remember them, then why did her soul bring her here? Why did it cry out for them? And why had she known with absolute certainty that coming to this place would lead to their resurrection?

"The witch?"

Tam knelt beside her, took her chin in his cold hands and raised it so that their eyes met. She didn't have the strength left to resist. "You are the only witch here, Julia. Look around you. There is nothing to this place. Certainly, broken souls have fled here in the past, grasping for miracles, but what remains of them? Empty shadows and ancient dirt. You are better than that, Julia. Will you come with me?"

She shook her head and Tam hissed in frustration. "Then stay here for the rest of your days. Rot in this hovel. And let every second be a remembrance of what you could have had."

Then he vanished, and Julia was free of him. She couldn't help but wonder if she'd made yet another mistake, but if living her life out this way was her penance, then she would pay it.

She leaned on the bag of body parts, wondering why they'd been left there for her to find if there was nothing she could do with them. In her mind, the witch's cottage had been filled with the smell of apple cider and arcane magic. Bottles and potions and maybe a fat, sleepy cat. She remembered a book of children's tales she'd treasured as a girl, and the faded illustration of Hansel and Gretel, walking up the witch's path on their way to the oven. And another of a kindly couple in their cottage, gasps of surprise on their faces as their gingerbread creation leapt from the oven and into life.

Fairy tales, and nothing but.

Bandy Tam was gone and she knew he wasn't returning. But his voice still haunted her. Teased her.

You are the only witch here, Julia.

And then she understood.

Flames erupted in the fireplace. Lace curtains replaced the shutters and shelves overstuffed with powders and vials crawled up the walls. Julia's body bag sat on a low kitchen table, and the smell of drying herbs and burning cedar coaxed her to her feet. The thatch rug felt good beneath them, and a wool robe cut the room's chill. She laughed nervously, amazed at the sudden change brought on by her epiphany. It was just as she'd imagined. The cottage had been nothing but a black hole, waiting to be filled up with her dreams.

Julia began removing the remains of her family from the bag and placing them gently on the table. She didn't have all the pieces, but maybe she had enough.

She thought about that gingerbread man again, and how the fires of fantasy had given him life. She brought the pieces together, arranging them just so, kneading flesh to flesh, and wondering what might happen if a witch were to put all of her hopes and dreams into an oven. ❧

olverung

Continued from page 77

I rode home the following morning on a mare I purchased from the tavernkeeper at the King's House in Drury Lane. He charged me twice what the animal was worth, but I paid him without complaint. Lord Atherton had delayed his departure for Paris to speak with me, and I did not want to keep him waiting.

As appointed, we met that night in the cemetery of our first encounter. His single candle flickered amongst the headstones like a forgotten wish.

"You have it, do you not?" He trembled with desire as he gaped up at my silken hood. "I've brought the rest of your gold."

"No doubt you have." I lifted a sack of five hundred sovereigns from beneath my cloak and threw it at his feet.

The old man looked at the bag and shook his head. "What's this?"

"Your original commission. You shall not have the bird."

Rage and fear rippled through the flesh of his face. "If this is a charade to increase your bounty—"

"No. It is not." I walked away.

"Two thousand! Three!" When I failed to turn around, he hobbled after me. "We had an agreement!"

His shouts became sobs as I neared the churchyard wall. "You don't understand! My late wife ... she speaks to me through the bird's song ..."

I climbed onto Obsidian's saddle.

"I'll find you!" Atherton screamed at my back as I rode away. "Do you hear me? I'll see your neck stretched before the fortnight is out!"

In truth, I pitied him. But no amount of gold would make me part with the Olverung.

When I returned to my modest country house that night, I stripped off my mask and stalked through the richly furnished but vacant rooms of my home until I reached my Vault of Treasures, the small study where I hoard the finest prizes of my career.

I ran my fingers over each of the trophies: Here sat the Eye of Oram, an emerald the size of an apple, that I took from a heretical cult in Barchester. There hung the ceremonial sword of the family Anwick, which I pulled from the bleeding body of the Earl himself. And here rested the gilded skull of the Vicomte de Vernier, his hollow eyes filled with fire opals, his teeth replaced by shards of violet amethyst.

I pored over these and dozens of other mementos, the spoils of a life spent pillaging the fortunes of the rich and wicked. None of them stirred even the slightest sentiment in me. Whatever thrill I experienced in stealing them had dissipated as surely as the intoxication of a fine brandy, and now they were nothing more to me than the dusty relics of empty victories.

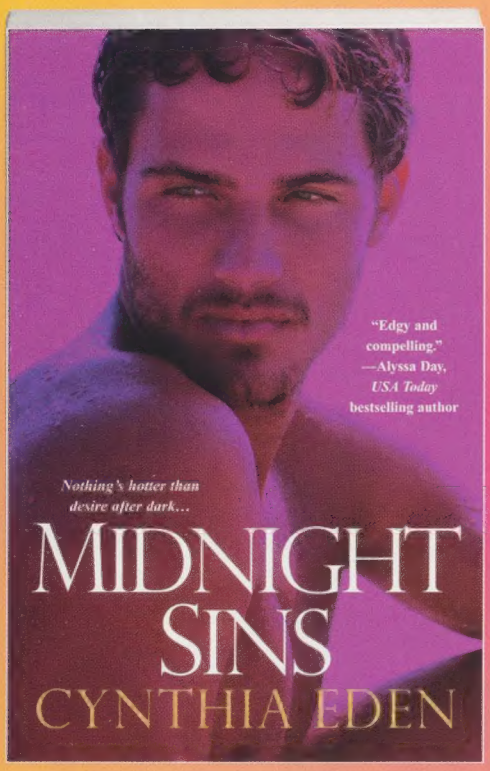
I moved on to the bronze cage in the far corner of the room, in which the Olverung sat placidly preening its feathers. How much it must have suffered through the centuries! I mused in awe as I opened the cage door and cupped my hands around the quivering bird.

The Olverung fluttered in my arms and nestled against my chest as I gently stroked its back. It seemed to take comfort in the touch of the man who had liberated it from Whitehall. My fingers trembled at the memory of its agony.

And I twisted its wing until it sang a song of such overwhelming beauty that the frozen sea within me cracked and melted.

I know that, of all my sins, this is the one that will surely damn me. Sometimes I resist the temptation. Inevitably, though, the gray parade of insipid days leads me back to the solace of the bird's music.

I possess neither the tools nor the talent of Signor Salveri, but what I lack in training I make up in invention, the novelty of my torments. I sit here alone, the Olverung in my lap, and compose a breathtaking serenade of suffering—a private melody of misery made all the more heartbreaking for the fact that the only one who hears it is the one who will never let it end. I play, and the Olverung sings, and I weep and weep and weep. ❧



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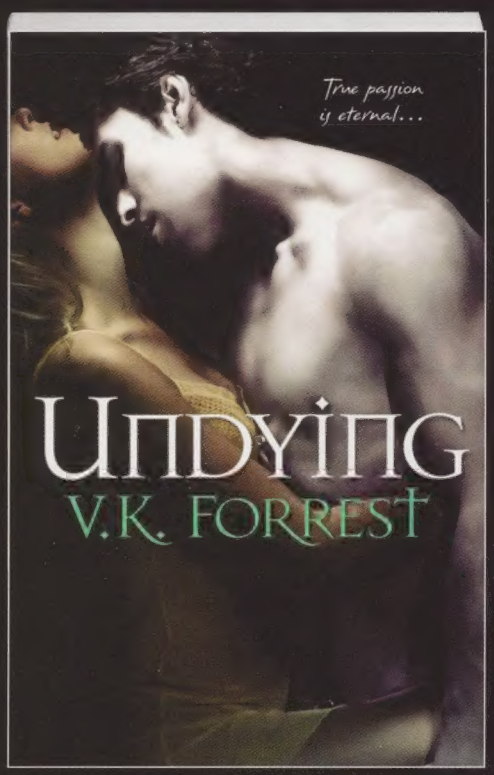

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